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REINFORCING SEX EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY HIGHER INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA: ADVANTAGES AND SETBACKS

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ABSTRACT

While comprehensive sex education is widely recognized as important for developing well-rounded and responsible individuals, instruction to promote it in Nigerian higher institutions remains limited. Discussions around sexuality education involve debates such as whether parents or schools should provide it, what should be an appropriate age for receiving, relevant content considerations, and opposition from some on moral or religious grounds since sex is viewed as sacred phenomenon. Such issues have continued hindering progress imparting sex literacy. Research shows that most Nigerian adults, including highly educated ones, lack sexual health literacy. Consequently, irresponsible sexual behaviors are increasing in homes, schools, workplaces and places of worship in Nigeria, and this correlate with rising child marriages, unintended pregnancies, abortions, job losses, dropping out of school, population growth and sexually transmitted infection spread. Therefore, this paper advocates for strengthening of comprehensive sex education in Nigerian higher institutions as a tool curbing risky sexual behaviors among Nigerian youths. A desk review approach was adopted for the study. Findings show that sexuality education is key to fostering youths' sexual health awareness which is critical in preventing diseases, unintended pregnancy and preparing the youths for responsible adult lives. Cultural beliefs, role dilemma and religion were major barriers to sex education in Nigeria. The study concluded that incorporating comprehensive sexuality education into university curricula

on a mandatory basis could play a key role in addressing risky sexual behaviors and empowering youths to protect their overall health, well-being and academic success

Keywords: Tertiary Institution, University Students, Reproductive Health, Comprehensive Sex Education, Risky Sexual Behaviour

Introduction

Sex education (SE) has often taken a back seat when exploring approaches to advance sustainable development in contemporary Nigerian tertiary education. The emphasis tends to be on boosting financial allocation to ensure improved working conditions for staff, infrastructure upgrades like dormitories, classrooms, offices, roads, strengthening libraries, and enhancing research and development (Adeogun, Oyebade & Osifila, 2009; Ugwu et al, 2022). In terms of producing well-rounded graduates, the catch-all subjects regularly seen as very important for interdisciplinary application are entrepreneurship and information and communication technology (Ugwu, 2021; Nwani et al 2022). Other issues of priority for institutions are climate change, and pandemics (Ofuebe, Iwuagwu & Ugwu, 2015). These are commonly regarded as lifelong learning necessary for adapting to our ever-changing world. Rarely would CSE be considered integral in planning Education for Sustainable Development. It bears noting that sexual maturation is a crucial part of human growth (Ugwu et al, 2021; Ogundipe & Ojo, 2015; Adekoya et al, 2023).

The modern Nigerian higher education institutions currently face varying behavioral issues among their student bodies. The most prevalent and widely documented of these behavioral problems are heterosexual activities variously termed in prior studies as sexual immorality, promiscuity, misconduct, maladjustment, abuse, and offenses (Nnachi, 2003; Diraditsile, 2018). There are also other forms of premarital permissiveness common among adolescents, such as homosexuality, prostitution, lesbianism, illegitimacy, sexual harassment and exploitation including rape and incest (Eze & Adu, 2015; Ugwu et al, 2022). This is understandable as most university students are young adults and adolescents, a developmental stage when sexual desires and drives peak (Gesinda, 2010; Ponton, 2000; Ugwu, 2021). Consequently, the youth often engage in behaviors like masturbation, flirting, kissing, and/or sex with a partner. Given sexuality is an inherent aspect of adolescents' lives (Ponton, 2000), this is plausible. These actions strongly correlate with rising instances of teenage/unwanted pregnancy, STIs, HIV/AIDS, abortion, guilt, lost self-respect, regret, substance abuse, depression, and suicide among adolescents (Shrestha, 2019; Ugwu et al, 2021;). Therefore, it is crucial at this point to guide young people through sex education programs in making informed, constructive, and safe choices regarding healthy relationships, responsible sexual conduct, and their reproductive health (Martino, Elliott, Corona, Kanouse & Schuster, 2008).

Neglecting sex education will significantly impact education's ability to achieve its overall goals. First, unintended pregnancy or disease diagnosis would likely influence students' academic performance, as

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the associated stress and health concerns are immense. Additionally, many students could feel compelled to drop out of school largely due to discrimination from teachers, administration, and peers regarding their situation (Mangel, 2010). Those absent from school would probably engage in further premarital sex and face elevated risks of teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (Rosenberg et al., 2015). Various ways in which school dropout has bedeviled educational system and the entire society are well documented (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Morison, 2006; De Cos, 2005; Mohsin et al., 2004; Oghuvbu, 2008).

If this trend continues unabated, the goal of education to emancipate people from limitations and exclusion, according to Onwuka (2012), will persistently be undermined. With this in mind, scholars have increasingly urged schools to make sex education an integral part of curricula (Orji & Esimai, 2003; Oshi et al., 2004; Qureshi, 2020; Ugwu, 2021; Adekoya, 2023). Consequently, this paper aims to examine the important roles sex education plays in developing well-rounded graduates and the need for it to be a compulsory course in modern higher education.

Statement of Problem

The subject of sex is complex and confusing for the young people. Given the bodily changes that accompanies adolescence, it is not out of place for the young people to have questions concerning sex, reproduction and the sexual feelings. However, the prevailing cultural milieu in developing countries like Nigeria sees sex as highly sacred and abhors discussion on it. The position of an average Nigerian parent is that the children will understand it when as they grow up. The common question is: why would young people know about sex and of what use is it to them? For them, it is only a morally bankrupt child that wants to know or talk about sex. Therefore, young people are prevented from listening to or participating in sex conversation. Even when parents want to dissuade their children from premarital sex, they find it uncomfortable mentioning it by its name thus: "don't allow boys to see your pantie" or "you will die if they touch you." This would not make any sense to the young girl because she has often been touched by boys yet she is alive. Therefore, the young people would even prefer risking the consequences of premarital sex instead of discussing their sex life with their parents or other adult about (Tulloch & Kaufman, 2013; Makinde et al, 2022). Other agents of socialization like cultural environment and the church cannot also properly guide the child on matters of sexuality. While the culture forbids the child from acquiring mere knowledge of the names of sex organs (Salami (2015), the church, on the other hand, has not found it comfortable presenting sex education to young people (Ogundipe & Ojo, 2015; Ugwu, Onyekachi, Anibueze, Onyekwere & Nwokeoma, 2021). Hence, sex has been shrouded in secrecy making it to remain an enigma for the young people. This gets them increasingly confused and affects how they understand sexuality. This provokes inquisition in their minds and they are left with the only choice of seeking information from other sources mainly peers and internet.

Electronic age has made information on sexuality very abundant and accessible to the young ones. The era also came with a

paradigm shift on how sexuality is defined and practiced. There are now new sexual lexicons, namely: virtual sex, video sex, sexting (sex arousing text messages), sex in chat rooms among others. A lot of pornographic materials are also available online. Therefore, sex has gone beyond the traditional that was hitherto limited to oral or anal sex, kissing, romancing, caressing of sex organ, vaginal intercourse and masturbation. Internet has offered opportunity for the young people to acquire a lot of information and exposure to sexual content. Regrettably, most of these sources of information are not censored and they present sex in such a way that makes it appear as normal and risk-free. For instance, American Academy of Pediatrics (2001) reported that sex between people who are unmarried was shown 24 times on television more often than sex involving married partners, and rarely will sexually transmitted infections and unwanted pregnancy be mentioned. To the young ones, the above may mean that since sex is frequent and everybody does it, then it is normal and risk-free (Canadian Paediatric Society, 2003; Ugwu, 2021).

In view of the foregoing, it becomes extremely difficult for the young people to make an informed choice. Because, in addition to managing their own hormonally driven desires, their brains are flooded with sexual stimuli from all sides including provocative content in movies, and TV shows, readily available Internet pornography, social media rife with flirtation and sexting (Marshall,2018). To make it worse, there is poor delivery of sex education in Nigerian secondary schools to properly guide them through the "sexual wilderness" (Ogbuinya & Nwimo 2015; Sule, Akor, Toluhi, Suleiman, Akpihi& Ali, 2015). Therefore, it could be fairly suggested that majority of the adolescents enter tertiary institution with lack of or poor exposure to the contents of SE. This creates room for all sorts of risky behaviour with increasing cases of morbidities linked to sexual ignorance and poor decision making among the adolescents (Prabhu, 2020).These concerns underscore the importance of providing adolescents with comprehensive sex education in Nigeria tertiary institutions.

Literature Review

Definition of sex education.

Various authors have come up with various definitions of sex education. Sex education is a process whereby information is given or imparted to a group of young ones and which takes into account the development, growth, the anatomy and physiology of the human reproductive system and changes that occur from youth all through stages of adulthood (Maduakonam, 2001, Nwani et al, 2022). It is a program of study intended to assist the youths acquire knowledge, skills and drive to make healthy choices about sex and sexuality as long as they live (Planned Parenthood, 2016; Ugwu, 2021). In the usage of Cora and Gerri (2016), SE means teaching about human sexuality, including intimate relationships, human sexual anatomy, sexual reproduction, sexually transmitted infections, sexual activity, sexual orientation, gender identity, abstinence, contraception, and reproductive rights and responsibilities. In similar usage, Advocate for Youth (2020) defined SE as an educational programme which provides information about bodily development, sex, sexuality, and relationships, along with

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skills-building to help young people communicate about and make informed decisions regarding sex and their sexual health. On the whole, it can be observed that SE is not limited to training people to avoid sex related problems. It is rather a programme which aims to assist individuals to flourish by focusing on their right to live informed, safe and enjoyable lives, with these rights being framed within the social context and local power dynamics (Aggleton & Cambell, 2000).

Roles of SE in youths' development.

The importance of SE across all ages is well documented (Omeje & Nwosu, 2007; Obiekea, Ovri & Chukwuma, 2013; Amaechi, Anyalebechi & Ariole, 2016). However, fundamentally, SE is an educational programme designed bearing the youths in mind because in humans, sexual ripeness precedes mental and emotional maturity needed to control sexual behaviours (Omeje & Nwosu, 2007). As earlier noted, this stage marks the peak of their sexual desires coupled with their characteristic sense of invincibility. More worrisome is that at this stage, they have not developed the social skills necessary for managing themselves to avoid consequences of risky sexual behaviours. Therefore, the general purpose of SE is to provide proper guidance for the young people which will help them in promoting their sexual health and well beings, as well as enhancing their positive life experiences so as to be able prevent diseases and unplanned pregnancies (Amaechi, Anyalebechi & Ariole, 2016). The purpose of SE for the youth is reviewed here in the light of the four dimensions of sexual health according to James (2012), namely: physical, mental, social and emotional wellbeing relating to sexuality.

Sex education enhances the understanding of physical wellbeing relating to sexuality by providing scientific information on human sexuality, human reproduction, anatomy and physiology of genital organs, pregnancy, child birth, parenthood, contraception, abortion, sexual abuse, HIV/AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases (STD).It also provides information on how to take care of the reproductive organs. It helps the young people to appreciate how the body structures of men and women function, and processes relating to sex and childbearing (Student Health Service, 2010). People have to be familiar with their own bodies, their needs and desires so as to able to appraise who they really want to have sex with, when and how it is appropriate to have it (Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response & Center for Wellness and Health Promotion, 2016).This knowledge will help them in preventing unintended pregnancies, early marriage that comes with Vesicovaginal fistula (VVF), reproductive health problems, HIV/AIDs and other sexually transmitted infections (Obiekea, Ovri & Chukwuma, 2013; Adekoya et al, 2023).

Sex education enhances mental and emotional wellbeing relating to sexual health. Basically, mental health is the ability of one to process information, whereas emotional health refers to one's ability to express feelings which are based upon the information one have processed (Herron, 2017). Therefore, SE promotes the ability of the young people to think clearly and coherently about sex and enhances their attitudes towards it. Sex Education offers the

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youngsters the opportunity of reexamining their sexual attitudes so as to build their own principles, develop self-confidence, acquire insights relating to relationships with people of different genders, and appreciate their roles to others (Prabhu, 2020). Aniebue (2007) and Ugwu (2021) added that sex education creates in the young people a positive attitude towards sexuality, provides them with knowledge and competencies for maintaining their sexual health and enables them to make sound reproductive health decisions.

Finally, SE promotes social skills relating to sexuality. Although there is a popular belief that sex education encourages sexual experimentation among the young people, Prabhu (2020) has a contrary position on this thus:

> *"Sex education encourages young people to delay sexual activity and to practice safer sex, once they are active. It helps them to develop skills like communication, decision making, assertiveness, peer refusal skills and ability to create satisfactory relationships. It helps the youths develop capacity for caring, supportive, non-coercive and mutually pleasurable intimate relationships. It helps young people exercise responsibility regarding sexual relationships, including abstinence, resist pressure to prematurely involve in sexual intercourse and encourage the use of contraception and other health measures" (Adapted from the web page).*

In a similar report supporting the above, Sunday and Umeh (2014) indicated that SE helps the youths in coping with peer pressure and reduces sex-related anxieties. Therefore, if the contemporary tertiary education in Nigeria should worth its salt, emphases should be placed on bequeathing the youngsters with the necessary knowledge, skills and competencies to operate effectually in facing the realities of life (Adeogun, Oyebade & Osifila, 2009). One of the ways of doing this is making sex education a general study subject and a prerequisite for graduation in higher institutions. Therefore, it is the belief of the present researchers that strengthening sex education will play important roles in curbing reckless heterosexual activities among the students in tertiary institution in Nigeria

Hindrances to SE in Nigeria

One of the hindrances to SE in Nigeria is role dilemma. Sex is generally regarded as very sacred and people are not always comfortable talking about it. The home shifts the responsibility to school whereas the school feels that the parents should take that responsibility. But parents are generally uncomfortable in discussing human sexuality with their children (Reis & Seidl, 1989; Kantor & Levitz, 2017)). However, some researchers believe that parents should be their children's first and most important sex educators, especially as it concerns values and behavioral anticipations (Marshall, 2018). Kids Health (2019) argues that if parents fail to provide guides for their children about sex and sexuality, then the

children will not only learn it from somewhere else but the opportunity to inculcate family values to the children will be missed.

Other major hindrances of SE all over the world are cultural and religious beliefs which preach morality, chastity and innocence (Barczyk, 2015). In religious and cultural perspectives, any form of discussions on sex is regarded as "immoral talks" or "dirty words" and should not be for the consumption of the children. Most parents shy away from giving SE their children because the African cultural beliefs about human sexuality forbid open discussion of sex related matters (Gesinde, 2010). Zulu, Blystad, Haaland, Charles, Haldis and Karen (2019) observed that even in school, the teacher exercises caution not to violate the local norms while presenting SE to the children. Because of this, according to Zulu et al, the teacher holds back some pieces of information from the learner while resorting to the use of discretion the gives rise to arbitrary teaching. This constitutes hindrance to gaining comprehensive knowledge relating to sexual health among the young learners.

Conclusion

Research findings have shown that sex education is very important in preventing sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies among the young people. However, there are factors that hinder sex education in Nigeria which include: role dilemma, cultural and religious belief. The paper proposes that if the SE is strengthened in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria, sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies with the accompanying poor academic performances of students will be curbed. However, the present researchers do not claim that this proposition is the answer for navigating all the sex-related health issues among the young people, but the researchers understand that students who have acquired knowledge of SE are more likely to make informed choices concerning sex.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, discussions and conclusion of this study which exposed the need to strengthen sex education in contemporary tertiary institutions in Nigeria, the present researchers recommend as follow:

1. Engaging various stakeholders, including students, faculty members, administrators, parents, and community organizations, in the development and implementation of sex education programs. This ensures that diverse perspectives are considered and increases support for the initiatives..
2. Establishing a standardized and evidence-based curriculum for sex education in higher institutions. Collaborate with experts in the field, such as sexual health educators, public health professionals, and researchers, to develop comprehensive and age-appropriate curricula that address the needs of the student population.
3. Providing comprehensive training and professional development opportunities for educators who will be delivering sex education. This training should include not only the acquisition of accurate information but also guidance on facilitating open

and inclusive discussions, addressing sensitive topics, and creating a safe learning environment.

4. Utilizing technology and multimedia resources to enhance the delivery of sex education. Online platforms, interactive modules, and educational videos can supplement classroom instruction and provide additional resources for students to access at their convenience.
5. Ensuring that sex education programs are inclusive of diverse sexual orientations, gender identities, and cultural backgrounds. Address LGBTQ+ issues and promote acceptance, respect, and understanding for all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
6. Regularly assessing the effectiveness of sex education programs through surveys, feedback mechanisms, and data analysis. Use this information to make necessary adjustments and improvements to the curriculum, teaching methods, and support services.
7. Establishing partnerships with campus health services, local healthcare providers, and community organizations to ensure students have access to confidential and comprehensive sexual health services, including STI testing, contraception, and counseling.
8. Conducting public awareness campaigns to promote the importance of sex education and dispel common misconceptions. Engage the broader community through workshops, seminars, and informational materials to foster a supportive environment for sex education initiatives.
9. Recognizing that strengthening sex education is a long-term commitment. Secure sustainable funding, institutional support, and ongoing advocacy to ensure the continuity and success of sex education programs in higher institutions.

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