



Commentary



Should sex education in the Philippines remain taboo?

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Abstract

Sex education is an important topic that is relevant in everyday life activities. However, due to its rare and sensitive connotation, this topic remains to be taboo in the Philippines. With the country having high devotion to Christianity, conversations about sex, sexuality, and sex education are considered inappropriate and sinful. This paper narrates the overview and reflections on a webinar program of occupational therapy students in Pampanga about the relevance of sex education in the youth, school, the occupational therapy profession, and the community. Sex education was discussed in a way that is not limited to sexual intercourse but covered how individual views and expresses themselves through their sexuality. Challenges such as providing sexuality education among children and youth should be provided to decrease teenage pregnancy and sex-related diseases. Schools, families, healthcare institutions, and communities should also be open about sex education to reduce experiences of negative mental health outcomes due to religious prejudice and biases and help the young generation to have lifelong healthy decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

Keywords: *sex education, Philippines, occupation, occupational therapy*

Sex education has been a taboo topic in the Philippines given the ever-growing culture of religiosity that the country has amassed in the past decades. With severe influences from the conservatism of the people in the country, sex is an unlikely topic of conversation because it is considered as bad and sinful (Runkel, 1998). Despite the significance of pro-abstinence beliefs in the country due to its religious stronghold, the Philippines continuously records an increase in teenage pregnancies. Whereas the Commission on Population and Development recorded 2,411 girls aged 10 to 14 gave birth in 2019. (Jaymalin, 2021) The identified age brackets would be in the young adolescence stage of life where it is generally unhealthy to conceive. During the pandemic, school closures, dysfunctional families, and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health education are considered to be the main factors that have caused the rise of teenage pregnancies. (Daquioag, 2021). The data shows that it is imperative to include sex education topics in schools, health institutions and, religious communities.

In a study by the Commission on Population and Development (2018), the crucial problems of women in the country are early adolescence and unpremeditated pregnancy. This issue has been so pervasive that the National Economic and Development Authority declared it last August 2019, to be a “National Social Emergency”. Given that there is an unceasing surge of teenage pregnancies in the country, sexuality education being implemented in schools may contribute to resolving this matter as treating sex as a taboo cannot inhibit the youth from being pregnant, but the provision of comprehensive sexual education does. As seen in the study of Kohler et al. (2008), provision of comprehensive sexuality education to youth, ages 15-19, were seen to be less likely to engage in sexual activities as compared to respondents targeted with abstinence-only-until-marriage programs.

The youth who are currently exploring their sexuality would mostly be curious about knowing and experiencing practices that they may find interesting and with the provision of comprehensive sexuality education programs, the youth are safeguarded as they explore since they are not only able to increase one’s knowledge in regard to sex but also improve their perceptions of reproductive health and sexual behaviors. (Unesco, et. al., 2018).

With the absence of proper guidance and comprehensive sexuality information, the youth may be put at risk as they may engage in unsafe sexual activities, therefore, increasing the chances of teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. People fear that dispensing sexuality-related information would further increase the rate of youth’s sexual activity, however, as seen on data on numerous studies, this has not been the case. Statistics show that 37% delayed their initiation to sexual intercourse, 31% decreased their recurrence in sex, 44% decreased one’s sexual partners, and 40% utilized condoms and contraception after being provided comprehensive sexual education programs (United Nations Population Fund, 2010).

The Philippines has been starting progress on developing a comprehensive sex education program for the youth in the country. Last 2018, to address the rising occurrences of early pregnancies, sexual violence, and diagnosis of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) among Filipino youths, the Department of Education (DepEd) published the Policy Guidelines for the Implementation of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), otherwise known as DepEd Order No. 31, series 2018 (DO 31). This policy intends to address the needs of Filipino adolescents for health and preservation and to reinforce their overall well-being through education, ascertaining that they are provided with sufficient and extensive information and relevant life skills. The DepEd has already carried out a CSE K-12 Curriculum Guide to Regions 1, 7, and 11 which are the regions supposedly having the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the country. (Siytangco, 2019)

Occupational Therapy is a profession that enables people across the lifespan to do the things they want and need to do through therapeutic use of daily activities known as occupations (American Occupational Therapy Association, Inc. [AOTA], 2021). Occupations are everyday activities that people do as individuals, in families, and with communities to occupy time and bring meaning and purpose to life (World Federation of Occupational Therapists [WFOT], 2012). Hence, sexual activity is considered to be an occupation. Based on AOTA’s Occupational Therapy Practice Framework: Domain and Process: 4th edition (2020), sexual activity is defined as “engaging in the broad possibilities for sexual expression and experiences with self or others”. Given this knowledge, occupational therapists and students are expected to provide appropriate intervention and education in sexual activity in different groups and populations. Despite the expected knowledge about sexual activity and sex education that occupational therapists provide interventions to, there is still a stigma and resistance in discussing and exploring this occupation among clients. Influenced by the Filipino culture that therapists and students have experienced, there are little to no interventions focused on this sensitive topic.

Given these consequences of sex education absence and the possible advantages of the sex education implementation, a webinar program was commenced and organized by the Capampangan Occupational Therapy

Students Assembly (COTSA) situated in the Angeles University Foundation. Occupation That Matter: Sex Education was the second installment in the OT Series of COTSA in which occupations that are rarely discussed but provide immense contributions to the life of a person are actively dissected by professionals and audiences through a discourse. Given its title, the main theme of the webinar was sex education and its significance to occupational therapy, youth, and all sexualities. The webinar happened on November 25, 2021, with guest speakers and panelists Senator. Risa Hontiveros, an advocate on gender rights and equality, Dr. Lou Noblefranca, a medical doctor that works on HIV care, Dr. Sakshi Tickoo, an international occupational and sex therapist, Mr. Rod Charlie Delos Reyes, an occupational therapist pioneering programs on gender and sexuality, and Mr. Jian Hernandez, president of the COTSA. The webinar was hosted by two members of COTSA.

During the webinar, various sex-related topics have been brought up by the speakers who had diverse experiences and knowledge about the theme of the program. Sen. Risa Hontiveros brought upon the event the issues that the Philippines is experiencing due to the lack of appropriate discussion of sexuality. She stated that it is integral for people to undergo sex education as this would decrease misconceptions about sex and eventually promote safe sex practices.

On the other hand, Dr. Noblefranca discussed the difficulties that people in the LGBTQIA+ Community had been experiencing in recent years. He explained the constant incidence of hate crimes that the members of the community are usually experiencing. These unwarranted actions derive from the continuous misinformation that is spread due to bigotry. Next to Dr. Noblefranca is Dr. Tickoo who focused on the importance of sex education as an occupational therapy intervention. She had emphasized the usefulness of sexual activity when it is incorporated into the factors that are considered when planning and implementing interventions. She reflected that the treatment of sexuality as a forbidden concept in the overall life of people limits the potential of therapeutic interventions to have an increased efficacy when they are applied to the unique identity of a person.

The panel discussion began after the explanation of Dr. Tickoo about the utilization of sex education in occupational therapy. Dr. Tickoo was joined by Dr. Noblefranca, Mr. Hernandez, and Mr. Delos Reyes. They are mediated by the hosts of the webinar as they engage in an interactive dialogue with one another. Questions were taken from the audience who submitted their entries to the COTSA officers during the webinar which allowed varying topics to be highlighted during the dialogue. For instance, strategies to have more open conversations about sex were asked to the panelists who offered suggestions that complement each other. Most of their answers provided differing points, but all of them led to the conclusion that being accepting, respectful, and tolerant about the sensitivity of other people must be practiced at all times to prevent intimidation and stupefaction in conversations. Examples of safe sex practices were also inquired to the panelists who stated that specific examples would be difficult due to the diversity of people's sexual identity. Instead of providing examples, they stressed the importance of communication with intimate partners and trustworthy advisors before, during, and after sexual activity. Another topic that was discussed was the methods to educate people about sex, especially children who will inevitably undergo puberty. In exploring this topic, the panelists emphasized providing honest answers to everyone but with consideration to the amount that they can understand since educating children needs appropriate responsiveness. The immense value of consent was also tackled when an appropriate response to a person who prefers to practice unsafe sex was asked during the webinar. The panelists stated that this would depend upon the discussion of intimate partners and the sexual preferences of the people involved.

To conclude the panelists' exchange of ideas, conversations about sex education should not be limited to sexual intercourse and connotating it as sexual because there are a lot of factors beyond that. Sex education should be emphasized at the start of every child's educational journey, in the community and families as it can prevent or reduce the risk of adolescent pregnancy HIV, and STIs for children and adolescents with and without chronic health conditions and disabilities (Chin, et. al., 2012). Children and adolescents should be shown how to develop a safe and positive view of sexuality through age-appropriate education about their sexual health. (Bruener, et al.,

2016). Transgender and non-binary youth face disparities in sexual health risks compared with cisgender peers (Haley, 2019). Therefore, education among these groups should also be prioritized. In the occupational therapy profession, sex education is rarely given emphasis. Despite the importance of sexuality to the overall quality of life and well-being for individuals with disabilities, occupational therapists continue to under-address this issue. (Eglseder, et. al., 2018). Knowing this helps us understand how sex education should also be tackled in occupational therapy evaluation and intervention.

The challenging topics that were discussed over the webinar have enlightened the possible benefits of having a formal education and open conversations about sex education. Some of the troubling issues in the Philippines that contribute to an even enormous issue of the country can be mitigated by correct dissemination of sex-related topics. Occupational therapy is one of the professions that predominantly tackles the improvement of performance in sexual activities given that it relies on successful performance on occupations as a method to improve the overall well-being and quality of life of an individual. This is clinically applied to the fact that sexuality and sexual activities contribute to the overall state of a person's condition (American Journal of Occupational Therapy [AJOT], 2020). Both concepts are considered to be integral in occupational therapy as they heavily influence the identity of a person which, in turn, affects their valued everyday life activities. Likewise, a problem in these areas of life could prove to be restricting the general engagement and deteriorating the health status of a person. When this happens, occupational therapists can provide various interventions with respect to the uniqueness of an individual's case. However, there is still much to be explored regarding sex-related concepts in occupational therapy when considering the intervention of such topics as taboo, which has impeded the search for knowledge about sex. Additionally, new knowledge about sex is commonly met with disbelief by the general population due to the extensive application of traditionalism and oversimplification in sex topics wherein the individuality of each person's sexuality is rarely explored which often results in confusion during sexual development (Boislard et al., 2016). This increases the difficulties in learning more information about sex and can result in a cycle of misinformation which eventually leads to unhealthy activities. Hence, it would be monumental for the children, youth, and adults to engage in a safer mode of sex discussion by having structured teaching where the manipulation of information is tightly supervised and gained from distinct trustworthy sources. Occupational therapists should also change the status-quo by providing interventions that could cater to the needs of individuals focusing on their sexuality. Provision of sex education should be of utmost importance and a challenge to schools, communities, and health institutions to create a safe environment to talk about important topics that could potentially help the young generation to have appropriate lifelong health decisions about their sexual and reproductive health.

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