

# Practices of Sexuality Education for Children in China's Rural Schools: Types, Challenges and Strategies

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## Abstract

When research focuses were mostly on urban schools, it is a great necessity of turning attention to sorting out the types and challenges of child sexuality education practices in China's rural schools and putting forward corresponding strategies. It is found that there are generally three practice types which are type of attaching to physiological courses, type of task-driven sexuality education part-time provided by basic subjects teachers, and type of class delivery by exterior social organizations. They are all facing practical challenges of lack of teaching resources, one-sided teaching contents, and poor educational sustainability. To cope with these challenges, highlighting the subject position of children, strengthening the construction of child sexuality education resources, promoting the concept and practice mode of comprehensive sexuality education and ensuring the sustainability of sexuality education courses or activities are crucial practical strategies.

## Keywords

Sexuality Education for Children, School-Based Sexuality Education, Rural Primary Schools, Sexuality Education Equality

## 1. Introduction

According to the data from the Girls' Protection's<sup>1</sup> Survey, in 2020, there were

<sup>1</sup>On June 1, 2013, hundreds of female journalists from all over the country launched the "Girls Protection" public welfare project in cooperation with Beijing Times, People's Daily Online, Phoenix Public Welfare, China Youth Daily and China Youth Public Welfare Channel. On July 6, 2015, "Girls Protection" was upgraded to a special fund, established under the China Children's Culture and Art Foundation. "Girls Protection" aims to "popularize and raise safety awareness of children", and is committed to protecting children from sexual abuse.

332 cases of child sexual abuse publicly reported by the media, with 845 victims, the youngest being only 1 year old. There were 114 cases in the primary school age group of 7 - 12 years old, accounting for 46.91%; 90 cases in the junior high school age group of 13 - 15 years old, accounting for 37.04%. Among them, 265 cases showed the geographical distribution of urban and rural areas. Of the 265 cases, 164 occurred in cities, accounting for 66.40%; 75 cases occurred in county towns, accounting for 30.36%; 26 cases occurred in rural areas, accounting for 10.53% (Girls' Protecting, 2021). As more and more cases of child sexual abuse are exposed via the media, child sexuality education has gradually attracted the attention of the public. Article 40 of the third chapter of the new "Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors", which has been officially implemented on June 1, 2021, stipulates that "Schools and kindergartens shall provide age-appropriate sex education for minors, and improve their self-protection awareness and ability of preventing sexual assault and harassment." As one of the most important subjects to implement child sexuality education, the responsibility of schools in the work related to minors' sexuality education has been formally clarified in the law for the first time. Urban schools in some developed areas such as Beijing and Shanghai have gradually accumulated some practical experiences in child sexuality education in recent years. However, compared with urban schools, rural schools also have a wide range of child sexuality education demands which have not yet been focused on. And the difficulties of sexuality education practice in consciousness, resources, and efficiency are very prominent, leading to the practice of sexuality education lagging behind urban schools significantly. This not only threatens the safety of rural children, but also causes inequality of sexuality education between urban and rural areas. Therefore, promoting the practice of child sexuality education in rural schools is not only a measure to ensure the safety of rural children, but also an indispensable part to ensure the integrity and fairness of rural children's sexual health education.

In the context of Chinese culture, there is a national gene of "sex is a taboo subject" (Lin, 2012). Until today's open, diverse and modern society, people still can't talk about "sex" in a natural way. Generally, sexuality education for adolescents in China is still in its infancy (Wang & Wang, 2012). Strictly speaking, academic research in the field of school sexuality education in China began in the 1960s (Li & Liu, 2020). More than 70 years of development and changes have promoted the practical and theoretical research achievements of school-based child sexuality education. Existing researches mainly focused on the topics of basic situation, contents, predicaments, effect evaluations, and practical experiences of school-based child sexuality education. Among them, in the description researches on the general situation, the most representative achievement was that the school-based sexuality education is facing three contradictions, namely, the contradiction between the early development of students' sexual physiology and the lag of sexuality education; the contradiction between the in-

crease in the demand for sexuality education and the shortage of teachers, teaching materials and unsustainable class hours; the contradiction between the purpose of school sexuality education and the uncertainty of family and social influence (Wang, Gao, & Wang, 2005). Most of the other description researches have indirectly explained the extreme lack of sexuality education in schools (Wei, Huang, & Yu, 2007) by investigating the awareness of sex-related knowledge among school students (Yang et al., 2007). Researches on school-based child sexuality education contents have undergone a transition process from sexual hygiene education oriented to physiological knowledge in the early period to sexual health education oriented to social problems in the later period and then to sexual safety education oriented to sexual relations in the latest period (Wu, Wan, & Zhou, 2018). As to the predicaments of school-based child sexuality education, the academic community held different views: one point of view claimed that the basic reason why child sexuality education was difficult to be implemented in schools lies in China's traditional conservative attitudes toward sex (Gao & Luo, 2002); while the other point of view argued that the "big problem/blocking of sexuality education" is not in the attitudes but in the system (Men & Wu, 2010). The researches on effect evaluation of child sexuality education were mainly conducted on the effectiveness in terms of educational contents (Liu & Liu, 2019), educational subjects (Teng, 2019), and educational methods (Wang, 2020). As for researches on child sexuality education practices in schools, different practice modes were research emphases. A paradigm shift has passed through from "chastity sex education" and "abstinence sex education" to "safe sex education" and "empowerment sex education" (Luo, 2019), and then to "holistic sex education" (Gao & Liu, 2017) and "comprehensive sexuality education" (Liu, 2021).

In general, the above studies have provided important theoretical and empirical support for the development of school-based child sexuality education in China, and have made a good analysis of the status and development of child sexuality education under the background of China's urban schools, but the relevant academic research on China's rural schools, especially rural primary schools, remains weak. School-based sexuality education is one of the main approaches to implementing sexuality education for children. What practices are made in child sexuality education in China's rural primary schools? What challenges do these practices face? How to cope with these challenges? The existing researches were relatively fragmented and did not give a systematic answer. Sorting out the above problems is of great significance for promoting the development of child sexuality education in China's rural schools and ensuring sexuality education equality. At the same time, for rural children, it can also reduce the incidence of child sexual assault and improve the safety protection efficiency.

In view of this, by referring to the existing academic literature and based on the author's field survey of 4 rural schools in J City, this paper is going to analyze

the practices of child sexuality education in rural primary schools in recent years, and briefly summarize the practice types and challenges faced by rural primary schools in China and then propose corresponding practical strategies. Hopefully, this paper could provide some inspiration for further practical and theoretical research of promoting child sexuality education in China's rural primary schools, and also provide a new perspective for the research of education fairness.

## 2. Materials & Methods

At present, there are three main approaches of sexuality education for children in China: school-based sexuality education, family-based sexuality education and peer sexuality education. This paper takes rural primary schools as the analysis unit, focuses on school-based child sexuality education, and adopts the method of semi-structured in-depth interview to collect data. The interviewees were selected by means of criterion sampling, including 4 principals of 4 rural primary schools, 5 head teachers of senior grades, 6 ordinary teachers, 4 psychological counselors, 18 senior grade students, and 16 parents of rural children. The interview lasted about an hour for each interviewee. The interview contents mainly include the understanding of child sexuality education, the concept and attitude of carrying out child sexuality education in schools, the content, frequency, form and difficulties of carrying out child sexuality education in schools, etc.

## 3. Situation of Child Sexuality Education Practices in Rural Primary Schools

### 3.1. Types of Sexuality Education Practices in Rural Primary Schools of China

Through the review of relevant literature as well as the author's field survey, there are following types of child sexuality education practices based on rural schools in current China (see **Table 1**):

**Table 1.** Types and structural characteristics of sexuality education practices for children in rural primary schools.

Practice types	Practice contents	Practice motivation	Practice performance
Type of attaching to physiological courses	Abstinence	risk avoiding	"Sex is a taboo subject."
Type of task-driven sexuality education part-time provided by basic subjects teachers	Safety protection	task-driven	inadequate education results
Type of class delivery by exterior social organizations	Comprehensive sexuality education	performance-driven	Professionalism and education results are both increased.

### 3.1.1. Type of Attaching to Physiological Courses

This is one of the very common types of sexuality education practices in China's rural schools since modern times. Such schools mainly include rural primary schools in remote and economically backward locations. Specific sexuality education practice is roughly achieved through biology, science, PE or other related courses dependently, in which the education contents are reflected in a certain chapter. When it comes to the process of gestation, the private parts of human body structure, physiological period of boys and girls, etc., most of them are instructed in forms of skipping reading or self-study. What this type of practice practices is in nature abstinence sexuality education, the purpose of which is to try to avoid various risks that may be caused by sensitive sexual vocabulary and sexual culture. This partly stems from the conservative sexual concept of abstinence held by the teachers of the remote rural schools. It also partly stems from the schools' limited resources and capacity, which make them difficult to bear all kinds of risks, including sexual risks. The leaders and teachers of such schools tend to have the cognition that "sex is a taboo subject" and sexuality education is a "minefield" that they dare not to touch.

### 3.1.2. Type of Task-Driven Sexuality Education Part-Time Provided by Basic Subjects Teachers

With the continuous improvement of policies, laws and regulations related to child protection, some rural schools started to have initial recognition on the importance of carrying out sexuality education. However, considering the very limited educational human, material and financial resources of schools, they have to take coping strategies of using basic subjects teachers serving as part-time sexuality education teachers. Basically, the teachers who will undertake the task of sexuality education courses or activities are schools' biology, science, or PE teacher, school doctor or psychology teacher. Youth health lectures containing the knowledge of adolescent mental health, physiological health, child sexual assault prevention and AIDS prevention are the main education form. Due to the imperfect system of school-based sexuality education policies, laws and regulations, there are still no unified nationwide sexuality education standards (Zhang, Wang, & Huang, 2021), and no assessment standards available in practice. That's also why most rural schools adopt a task-driven response strategy. There is no endogenous motivation of carrying out child sexuality education for rural schools. A survey showed that the vast majority of school leaders have a certain positive awareness on the importance of carrying out child sexuality education, but there are still some other school leaders who passively need the promotion from their superior department; and another 16.23% of school leaders were still in belief of sexuality education would increase the burden of school teachers (Men & Wu, 2010) even under superior document instructions.

### 3.1.3. Type of Class Delivery by Exterior Social Organizations

With the development of social organizations and the coverage of township social work stations, a small number of rural schools have received class delivery

services from exterior social organizations, filling the gap in school-based sexuality education temporarily. Compared with the above two types, this practice of class delivery by social organizations has made obvious progress in terms of educational content, educational form, educational effect, and teachers' professionalism. Concerning providers of class delivery, the types of social organizations can be roughly divided into two: ordinary voluntary service organizations and professional social work organizations. Most of the class deliveries provided by ordinary volunteer service organizations are carried out by school year. Every school year, volunteer lecturers are sent to the contracted schools to carry out youth health education lectures. The contents of courses cover knowledge of adolescence physiological hygiene, child sexual assault prevention, AIDS prevention, etc. Since the pandemic hit, the delivery forms have developed into two types: online and offline; the other type is mainly provided by professional social work organizations. Child sexuality education is one of the work domains that professional children's social work will concern and service. Different from ordinary voluntary service organizations, professional social work organizations are more inclined to carry out practices in children's subjectivity, environment, system perspectives, stress more emphases on service effectiveness evaluation, and also pay more attention to vulnerable groups in schools.

### **3.2. Challenges of Sexuality Education Practices in Rural Primary Schools of China**

Although some rural schools in our country have gradually started to put child sexuality education into practice, there are still quite a lot of challenges as far as the current situation is concerned:

#### **3.2.1. Child Sexuality Education Resources Shortage in Rural Primary Schools**

The lack of child sexuality education resources is a common problem faced by both urban and rural schools in China, but especially in rural schools which are mainly reflected in the lack of human resources, material resources such as books and tools, social support resources, time resources and so on. A survey on the reasons for the difficulty in carrying out sexuality education in schools found that the main factors affecting child sexuality education entering schools successfully include "the qualification of teachers does not meet the requirements" (accounting for 36.8%), "there is no special teaching material" (accounting for 28.9%) and "no dedicated class hours" (accounting for 13.7%) (Men & Wu, 2010). It is not difficult to find that the lack of external resources restricts school-based child sexuality education practical activities even higher than the restrictions of traditional conservative attitudes.

#### **3.2.2. One-Sided Sexuality Education Contents for Children in Rural Primary Schools**

Judging from the evolution of school-based child sexuality education, the educational contents are limited to only some basic aspects, such as adolescent physi-

ological health, child sexual assault prevention, and AIDS prevention. They are not only one-sided, but also isolated from each other and not systematic. What is even more worrying is that such sex education practices can easily influence people form a wrong perception that sex education is just about reproductive health, sexual assault prevention, and AIDS prevention education, which will lead to a narrower and narrower path for the development of sexuality education. In fact, according to the International Sexual Education Technical Guidance Outline, sexual health education includes sexual physiology, sexual psychology and sexual morality (UNESCO, 2010). At present, the two most popular schools of sexuality education in the world, empowering sexuality education and comprehensive sexuality education, both advocate that the essence of child sexuality education is education about children's all-round development and is an important part of quality education. Compared with international practice, there is still a long way to go to improve the content range and quality of child sexuality education in China's rural primary schools.

### **3.2.3. Unsustainable Sexuality Education Activities for Children in Rural Primary Schools**

The biggest dilemma in the current practices of child sexuality education in rural schools lies in its unsustainability. Although government, schools, social organizations are making efforts in maintaining its sustainability, the general situation is still not that optimistic. Apart from some international schools or aristocratic schools in certain developed cities that will purchase systematic course services on a semester-by-semester basis, most of the ordinary urban schools and rural schools only hold one youth health lecture every school year. From the school's point of view, they indeed achieved sustainability to hold a lecture on a regular yearly basis, though the lecture contents each time remain the same since the students vary every year. This means the student individuals receive sexuality education only once per year, which is far from enough. A parent interviewed by the author said: "In my personal opinion, it is basically acceptable to carry out child sexuality education in school. I totally do not agree with those views in society that parents are too outdated to accept sex education. There may be some but not all of them. We feel like it's just a game if you do it once, and then it's gone. What I'm saying is if the sexuality education courses or activities are held like music, sports, or art classes regularly, it is completely acceptable for us parents. Schools are much more trustworthy after all." This parent's point of view is very enlightening. In the current society of modern civilization, the root cause of hindering the development of child sexuality education can no longer be focused on cultural concepts, but more on down-to-earth practices. As long as someone does it, people will slowly accept it.

## **4. Practice Strategies of Child Sexuality Education in China's Rural Schools**

Child sexuality education implemented in schools plays a positive role in im-

proving children's reproductive health, strengthening their gender equality awareness, preventing child sexual abuse, gender-based school bullying, early marriage and early childbearing, reducing unsafe sex behaviors, unwanted pregnancy and induced abortion, reducing sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection. The practice types and practical challenges of child sexuality education in rural primary schools sorted out above are of great enlightenment to further promote the practical development of child sexuality education for China's rural schools.

#### **4.1. Highlight the Subject Position of Children in the Child Sexuality Education System in Rural Schools**

First of all, in terms of the implementation subjects of child sexuality education, domestic academic community mainly advocates to construct an interactive mechanism of the trinity of school-family-society (Zhang & Yang, 2013). On this basis, this study argues that school-based child sexuality education system should be constructed on a basis of quadri-unity of child-school-family-society. It is no doubt that the centrality and subjectivity of children themselves should not be ignored in any child protection service. Child sexuality education is education for children, not what their families, schools or society think they need from a bystander perspective. The essence of child sexuality education is education about child growth. The ultimate goal is to promote the overall healthy development of children. Paying attention to children's subjective participation in sexuality education is more conducive to the development of children's rights and abilities. Children are here both the object and subject of child sexuality education.

#### **4.2. Strengthen the Construction of Child Sexuality Education Resources in Rural Schools**

The construction content of sexuality education resources should include syllabus, teaching materials, teaching aids, teacher resources, class hours resources, and so on. To complete these resources construction, it is inseparable from the collaborative efforts of educational administrative departments, schools, teachers and society. The author's survey shows that in such an open, diverse, scientific, modern and civilized era, people's overall cultural literacy has generally improved, and conservative concepts are no longer the basic source of restricting the development of child sexuality education. On the contrary, more and more people have realized the scientific effects of child sexuality education. In addition, among the four main educational channels via family, peers, society and school, school-based sexuality education is the most reliable channel. As far as the current situation is concerned, the promotion from higher authorities is the key to promoting child sexuality education in rural schools. The education administrative department and local schools can first promote the establishment of the status of child sexuality education courses, so that they have fixed class hours like music, art, and sports courses; secondly, they can publish syllabus and de-



signate scientific teaching materials, so that teachers' educational activities can be guided and qualified. Besides, schools can also actively encourage and support teachers to develop and compile sexual health education materials suitable for rural school students according to local rural culture.

#### **4.3. Promote the Concept and Practice Mode of Comprehensive Sexuality Education**

Many of the current practices of child sexuality education in China equate the concepts of sex education, adolescent education and physiological health education, and lock the education objects in teenagers only (Zhang, Wang, & Huang, 2021). This misunderstanding is one of the main reasons leading to the one-sided content of child sexuality education. The concept of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) responds well to this dilemma. It is a curricular education process that explores the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social meanings of sexuality. The aim is to equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values to ensure their health, well-being and dignity (Liu, 2021). Therefore, only by promoting the concept of comprehensive sexuality education can rural schools enrich the educational content and truly achieve the purpose of sexuality education.

#### **4.4. Ensure the Sustainability of School-Based Sexuality Education Courses or Activities**

Because primary school students will study and live in school for up to six years, school-based sexuality education is without a doubt the most important way to ensure the sustainability. On the one hand, schools can strengthen cooperation with exterior social organizations. At present, one of the most important service forces for child sexuality education in China comes from social organizations. Take Girls' Protection, Bao Hu Dou Dou, You and Me and some other local social organizations for example, they cultivate a group of volunteer lecturers every year who will have to take continuous training on professional knowledge, professional education skills and professional value rationality, especially the desensitization training on "sex". They then send them to different areas all over the country to do child sexuality education lectures. There are also some local social work agencies participating in child sexuality education through charitable projects purchased by local governments in recent years. All of these practices are conducive to the sustainability of school-based sexuality education courses or activities; on the other hand, schools can encourage and support those teachers with child protection feelings to have systematic education and training, so as to reserve sexuality education teachers resources. Anyway, due to the particularity of child sexuality education, the school's own strength or the strength of society in isolation may not be able to achieve the desired sustainable effect. Only when the two are combined can they complement each other and achieve sustainable development.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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