

## Implementation of Sex Education in Indonesia: A "*Sine Qua Non*" in Taboo

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**Abstract.** There are significant differences between the methods used in Western and Eastern culture to discuss sex. Any topic related to sex in Eastern culture, specifically Indonesia, is often considered taboo compared to Western culture. This is due to the strong cultural and religious values prevalent in Eastern societies, making discussions about sex feel impolite and inappropriate. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the importance of sex education as a "*sine qua non*" in Indonesia and the consequences of treating sex education as a taboo. The exploration process would examine the role of parents, teachers, counselors, psychologists, and the community in sex education, new sex education policies, along with recommendations, implications, and directions for future investigations.

**Keywords:** curriculum; educational psychology; Indonesia; new perspective; sex education; sine qua non; taboo

### Introduction

Sex is commonly discussed through different methods in both Western and Eastern culture (Francoeur, 1992; Wollast et al., 2018). In Eastern culture, specifically in Indonesia, sex is considered a taboo subject (Arnez & Nisa, 2024; Maimunah et al., 2024; Nur et al., 2024; Siti, 2019), compared to Western culture where it is more openly discussed (Bennett & Davies, 2014). This disparity is attributed to the intrinsic cultural and religious values prevalent in Eastern societies, making discussions about sex feel impolite and unworthy of further exploration (Situmorang, 2024; Utomo et al., 2014).

The difficulty in discussing sex spans across various contexts, including societal settings, formal educational environments, and families (Arnez & Nisa, 2024). Many parents in Indonesia struggle with providing sex education to the children (Nurachmah et al., 2018) and feel confused as well as afraid to discuss matters related to this subject, which is not customary in Eastern culture. The number of parents adopting a more open mindset to these discussions is still relatively small, compared to the

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unwilling counterparts.

All the described challenges have led numerous children and adolescents to search for information about sex from various media sources without parental control or guidance (Kurniasanti et al., 2019). The information available in the media is often unrestricted and explicit (Adams et al., 2003), making adolescents test different ideas out of curiosity without considering the potential impacts (Fillamenta, 2018; Lacasa et al., 2017; Markey & Loewenstein, 2014). Consequently, large number of adolescents engage in premarital sex (Sovianti et al., 2024; Tasnim, 2019), experience unwanted pregnancies (Rohmah et al., 2020), early marriage (Idawati et al., 2023), and contract sexually transmitted infections or HIV/AIDS (Fitriani & Salim, 2021). To mitigate these negative effects, parents need to provide positive sex education (Sutton, 2003; Walker, 2001, 2004) and serve as trustworthy entities with which the children can discuss concerns regarding sexual development (Turnbull et al., 2008).

The role of teachers, counselors, and psychologists in schools is crucial, as these professionals can help students address questions and issues concerning sexual development. Therefore, this study aimed to comprehensively explore and present various perspectives on sex education in Eastern culture. The perspectives are expected to facilitate the formulation of new policies advocating for the inclusion of sex education as a primary component of the curriculum in Indonesia. Moreover, the exploration process needs to be conducted urgently because the current literature that has discussed topics related to sex is very limited (Hasni, 2024; Maimunah et al., 2024; Nur et al., 2024).

## Discussion

### *Sex Education in Indonesia*

Sex education is still considered a taboo subject in Eastern culture, specifically in Indonesia (Siti, 2019), a large archipelago country with 17,504 islands and over 1,300 ethnic groups. Furthermore, the citizens practice various religions, including Islam, Protestantism, Catholicism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism (Situmorang, 2022).

The values, customs, and beliefs of individuals in a country with diverse ethnic groups and numerous religions naturally become the guidelines for daily life, thereby forming fundamental principles that shape thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. For instance, in Indonesian culture, sex is viewed as a topic unworthy of being discussed openly because it is considered rude (Utomo et al., 2014). Common statements such as "*Sex is an adult's business; children shouldn't know!*" often trigger curiosity, leading to the quest for information that adults prefer to keep private.

The persistent blend between the system of government and religions practiced in Indonesia poses significant challenges to the implementation of sex education (Holzner & Oetomo, 2004; Nur et al., 2024). Additionally, all regulations, including sex education policies, are often based on some element of faith or conviction. Religious dogma prohibiting premarital copulation is among the significant obstacles hindering the provision of comprehensive sex education (Cense et al., 2018).

Society often misconstrues teaching about sexuality and reproduction as promoting the desire for intercourse or other sexual behavior, which conflicts with religious views (Bennett & Davies, 2014).

#### *The Effects of Considering Sex Education as a Taboo*

Cases such as premarital sex, pregnancy out of wedlock, and abortion signify the lack of sex education in a country (Berliana et al., 2018). This relates to the results by Santelli et al. (2017) regarding abstinence-only education or sex education that instructs students to wait until marriage before engaging in intercourse is ineffective at lowering early pregnancy rates and the spread of Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs). Additionally, the students remain curious, increasing the tendency to engage in risky sexual activity than adolescents who receive a thorough education, which includes knowledge about contraception and access to sexual health examinations. Adolescents receiving comprehensive sex education make mature decisions about sexuality, along with a higher tendency to use protection during intercourse and perform regular medical assessments.

The absence of sex education for children and adolescents has led to over 63% of 15 - 24-year-old individuals across Asia and the Pacific region engaging in sexual activity (UNFPA, UNESCO, & WHO, 2015). As sexuality is a natural part of human development during adolescence, the onset of sexual behavior at this stage is a common and expected aspect of growth. However, many adolescents lack the information and life skills necessary to engage in safe and healthy sexual behavior, leading to undesirable consequences such as early pregnancy, unsafe abortion, coerced or violent sexual behavior, STIs, and HIV (Mbizvo & Zaidi, 2010).

Early marriage is more common in rural than urban regions due to a lack of sex education (Windiarti & Besral, 2018). Girls with lower socioeconomic positions and educational attainment also experience this situation (Marshan et al., 2010). Unwanted pregnancies, particularly those occurring outside marriage, can have detrimental effects, including stigma, social exclusion, forced school expulsion, coerced marriage, as well as violence and suicide in rare circumstances (Astuti et al., 2020). Abortion is severely regulated or outlawed in Indonesia, as well as associated with high morbidity and mortality (Sedgh & Ball, 2008). Additionally, early marriage, which leads to or results from pregnancy cases, raises the risk of STIs, intimate partner abuse, and social isolation (Berliana et al., 2021).

#### *The Role of Parents, Teachers, Counselors, Psychologists, and the Community in Sex Education*

There is a concern among the majority of Indonesian parents, teachers, counselors, psychologists, and community members that teaching children and adolescents about sexuality might lead to experimentation (Bennett, 2007). Further investigation of this perspective clarifies that sex education can instill a sense of responsibility in children and adolescents to make informed sexual decisions based on reliable knowledge and values acquired. Children and adolescents afraid to ask the parents and teachers for necessary information may choose to obtain knowledge from less trustworthy sources, as prohibitive attitudes often produce negative effects.

Parental participation in efforts of the community to educate children about sex is essential in present culture (Noorman et al., 2022; Shtarkshall et al., 2007). Studies show that parents play a crucial

role in ensuring children have a sufficient understanding of sexuality and health (Pop & Rusu, 2015; Walker, 2001, 2004). However, surveys identified rare conversations about sexuality and reproductive health among Indonesian parents, primarily due to the culture classifying these as taboo (Nurachmah et al., 2018; Siti, 2019). Societal attitudes regarding sex education remain negative, with many arguing that it motivates children and adolescents to engage in extramarital sex.

The described perspective may result from a lack of guidelines and materials for parents to use in providing sex education. Meanwhile, in Eastern culture including Malaysia (Makol-Abdul et al., 2009) and Western culture, parents collaborate with teachers as well as counselors to study sex education guides and materials, facilitating comprehensive knowledge provision for children and adolescents (Turnbull et al., 2008).

#### *New Policies for Sex Education as a Sine Qua Non in Indonesia*

Sex education inclusion into the formal curriculum of schools is essential due to the numerous benefits possessed, and teachers should be adequately prepared to teach all the subjects covered (Buston et al., 2002; Costello et al., 2022). Schools offer the best platform for meaningful two-way conversations with many adolescents (Luker, 2007). Moreover, special attention should be provided to students who are often the most marginalized and at greater risk. Reports show that learning about private and delicate subjects in an overly strict manner is ineffective. Therefore, boys and girls both need secure environments for learning (Moran, 2002) to ensure comfort during the sharing of individual stories and thoughts. Teachers require assistance in providing suitable learning opportunities and environments, while analytical skills are necessary for children to make ethical decisions regarding sexual conduct (Dawson, 1995).

The field of sex education desperately needs innovative methods (Barak & Fisher, 2001), hence the development of creative strategies to teach boys and girls about sexuality using technology and other accessible media is essential (Chu et al., 2015; Ilmiah & Azizah, 2022; Pinsky, 2022). Efforts must be intensified to find the most effective methods, important information, and collaborators suitable for the impartation of sexual health knowledge to children and adolescents in a safe, positive, and age-appropriate manner. Sex education should be incorporated into the lives of the current young generation through creative curriculum in schools and institutions (Goldman, 2010; Warner & de Vreede, 2011; Whaley, 1994).

Contrary to common opinion, reproductive and sexual health education is often uncombined or not equated (Constantine et al., 2009), even though reproductive education covers topics associated with sexuality and is a component of sex education. A careful examination conducted showed that the Indonesian school curriculum for 2013 (Kurikulum Merdeka, 2022) only contained materials on reproductive health. Therefore, the current merdeka curriculum (Kurikulum Merdeka, 2022) is recommended to include more in-depth materials related to sex education, with the hope that this can become a "*sine qua non*", which is very necessary and important, which "*without which it is impossible*" or "*without which there would be nothing*".

Distinguishing between sex and reproductive education is important, considering that children

are often provided with reproductive education in schools. Reproductive education is generally accessible to everyone, including children. However, the delivery goal for sex education needs to be more specific, as many Indonesians only equate sex with sexual contact (Bennett, 2007). Parents, teachers, counselors, and psychologists must understand the distinctions between academic and common knowledge in the new curriculum at all educational levels to bridge the gap between these two concepts. Supposing sex education cannot be explicitly included in certain subjects, it is expected to be incorporated into extracurricular or programmed routine activities through seminars and guidance from counselors, psychologists, or experts.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this study identified that the lack of sex education in Indonesia was caused by several factors, including consideration of the topic as a cultural taboo, misunderstandings among children about sex, and the absence of specific subjects regarding sex education in the learning curriculum. Moreover, several parents refrained from discussing sex education at home due to cultural norms. In addition, it is felt important to create new policies so that sex education in Indonesia is a "*sine qua non*".

### *Recommendations*

Breakthrough recommendations for all social institutions, including families or parents, schools, and the government based on this study are as follows. a) For families or parents: Parents should play an active role in complementing topics children learn about sex education in schools. Engaging with children in a close manner, such as watching a drama together and providing direct explanations of sexual content, can help demystify the topic. Parents should answer questions about sexuality honestly, allow children to express individual thoughts, and explain social standards regulating sexual behavior. b) For schools: Indonesian schools adopt practices from Western countries and culturally similar nations such as Malaysia, where parents collaborate with teachers and counselors to study relevant guides and materials. This collaborative method can provide comprehensive sex education for children and adolescents. c) For the government: New policies need to mandate the inclusion of sex education in the curriculum. This would enable a more informed sex-related discussion among children, teachers, counselors, psychologists, and parents.

The implications of this study are intended for several stakeholders. Parents, teachers, counselors, psychologists, and the community are expected to work collaboratively to prepare children and adolescents for the future by providing sex education in a creative as well as digestible manner without violating the norms and values of Indonesia. In addition, education policymakers need to implement proactive steps to address this challenge.

For researchers, further study on sex education in Indonesia, considering the diverse tribes, religions, and islands, would be valuable. Investigating the perspectives on sex education from various cultural viewpoints could enrich the scientific field and inform the development of region-specific curriculum. Additionally, counselors and psychologists should explore innovative interventions, such

as music therapy (Situmorang, 2021), which may appeal to the young generation facing challenges in sexual development. This correlates with the need for creative strategies in sex education, signifying the importance of developing new methods to effectively educate boys and girls about sexuality.

## Declaration

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### *Authors' Contributions*

The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

### *Conflict of Interest*

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

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