

# TEACHING SEX EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA: A SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS DILEMMA

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## ABSTRACT

The viewpoint of Akwa Ibom State education administrators, teachers, parents, clergy, and community leaders living in the United States and Nigeria on teaching Sex Education in Akwa Ibom State schools was examined in this study. The general consensus was that Sex Education should be taught in Akwa Ibom State schools since the purpose of Sex and Family Life Education is to help young people accept their sex role and integrate it into a constructive life-style. While there was no clear cut response as to the church's intervention, it was unanimously agreed by all respondents that the Ministry of Education should not ignore church politics in the implementation of Sex Education curriculum in Akwa Ibom State schools. The respondents were of the opinion that the church, schools, parents, and the community should work hand in hand with one another in the planning and implementation of an effective Sex Education curriculum in both public and privately owned schools in Akwa Ibom State.

**KEYWORDS:** Sex Education, Curriculum, Students, Teachers, Nigeria

## INTRODUCTION

One of the foremost shortcomings having a bearing on health and happiness is the widespread lack of knowledge and understandings of human sex and sexuality. While many developing countries including Nigeria have grown increasingly tolerant of premarital sex, the level of understanding among youths about pregnancies, contraception, venereal disease, abortion, and boy-girl sex roles, etc. has not risen accordingly. One of the reasons that could be advanced for this according to Briggs (1994) is the fact that most parents or guardians do not discuss sexual matters with their daughters or wards as a result of shyness, ignorance on sexual matters or societal norms that do not encourage open mother-with-daughter discussion on sexual matters. Oilkeh (1981) also noted that most parents are either not knowledgeable on sexual matters or are embarrassed to discuss them with their daughters. But then, studies by Gypi-Garbrah (1985) and Ladipo et. al. (1986) show that adolescent girls today are more sexually active than they used to be because they mature early and are exposed to urban influences and changing traditional values and norms. The concern for human sexuality and the need to understand it, while it is both a powerful and popular topic, is frequently dismissed as "explosive" or "controversial." Yet, the fundamental problem of our sexuality remains exactly what it has always been, which is, how to reconcile our personal desires with our societal obligations.

The trend today is to accept or be tolerant of "permissiveness with affection" among youths at an early age. Therefore, education for sexuality and responsible living should be the preoccupation of today's society. The school, church, and home have a cooperative job to do. While health education is currently required in the Akwa Ibom State schools' curriculum, hundreds of communities have opted to forbid sex education and/or birth control education all together. Yet, the study conducted by Udoh (1993) shows that both teachers and students in Akwa Ibom State schools have inadequate health knowledge in various health content areas including Family Life and Sex Education. The purpose of this paper, therefore, was to sample the opinion of Akwa Ibom State education administrators, teachers, parents, clergy, and community leaders both in the United States and Nigeria on the teaching of Sex Education in Akwa Ibom State schools, and to use the information to make suggestions to Akwa Ibom State education administrators, educators, parents, clergy, and community leaders regarding the teaching of "Sex Education" in Akwa Ibom State schools.

## Need for Sex Education Curriculum

Adepoju (2005) maintains that "... among health and educational professionals in Nigeria the feeling is widespread that the health of the adolescents is at risk. This burgeoning adolescent group who constitute more than 12 per cent of the population of Nigeria and whose number are expected to rise sharply over the years are often prone to unplanned sex, unwanted sex, unsafe abortion, sexual coercion, sexual violence, sexually transmitted infections and even HIV because they are uninformed, or poorly informed, about the implications of their reproductive behavior and health risks especially from under-age sexual practices and other anti-social practices." Against this background:

1. **There is increased teenage pregnancy and children being born to single teenage parents.**
2. **There is increased incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, for example, AIDS, syphilis, herpes, gonorrhoea, etc.**
3. **Parents are not comfortable with "Sex Education" being taught in schools. At the same time, they have difficulties discussing birth control issues with their children. As they say "...don't put ideas into their heads." Also, most parents do not see any need to discuss Sex Education.**
4. **Churches are making morals a key factor in preventing Sex Education from getting a place in the school's curriculum, thereby, influencing parents' decisions. The church officials maintain "it is immoral and against the doctrine."**
5. **Teachers do not feel comfortable to teach or discuss Sex Education since parents and churches do not approve of it.**
6. **There is urbanization. Children continue to move away from their parents to seek employment in cities. Also, youths are becoming sexually active and promiscuous as they lack parental guidance.**

## METHODOLOGY

**The methodology used to gather data for this study was by telephone and personal interview. Participants included**

education officers, headmasters and headmistresses of primary schools, principals of secondary schools, school teachers, parents, clergy, and community leaders both in the United States and Nigeria. A total of hundred people participated in this study and the population comprised of the following groups of participants:

1. Five education officers from Akwa Ibom Ministry of Education and ten education administrators from the United States.
2. Twenty educators which included headmasters, headmistresses, and principals in Akwa Ibom State schools.
3. Ten Nigerian educators which included principals in both elementary and high schools (secondary schools) resident in the United States.
4. Ten Nigerian clergy, five resident in Nigeria and five resident in the United States.
5. Forty school age parents, twenty of which live in Nigeria and twenty take up residence in the United States.
6. Five community leaders, three resident in Nigeria and two resident in the United States.

Each participant was asked the questions documented in the Research Instrument. The selection of the population interviewed was made based on the participants' interest to partake in the interview. The aforementioned population was selected at different levels because people at different levels have different problems and also, they perform different functions. This method helps provide feedback at every stage of the educational learning/planning process. As a result of the sensitivity of this study, it was difficult to specifically document what each subject in the population said with respect to teaching Sex Education in Akwa Ibom State schools. However, the findings documented in this paper are a synthesis of the discussions generated in the course of the authors' research work.

#### Study Area

Akwa Ibom State, the geographic focus of this study, is one of the thirty six states of Nigeria. Akwa Ibom State was created in September 23, 1987, with its capital at Uyo. Located in the southeastern part of Nigeria, Akwa Ibom State has a land area of approximately 8,412 square kilometers with a population of 2.5 million, consisting predominantly of Christians. Even though the state comprises of various ethnic groups, it has basically a common linguistic heritage – the main language being the Ibibio language. The State Education Policy focuses on the improvement of the quality of education, especially in the areas of mathematics, science, and technology.

#### Research Instrument

Based on the foregoing issues, the following interview questions were formulated to ascertain the place of Sex Education in Akwa Ibom State's school curriculum:

1. How do you feel about teaching Sex Education in Akwa Ibom State schools?
2. How do we gain support of churches, parents, teachers, and communities at large on including Sex

Education in the school curriculum? Should churches intervene?

3. Should the Ministry of Education ignore church politics and go ahead in the implementation of Sex Education programs in schools?
4. What would you prefer to call this course in Sex and Family Life Education? Where would you like to see it in the school curriculum – as a separate course, part of Health Education, or should it be integrated with other subjects?
5. Should teachers get additional training to enable them teach Sex Education in schools?
6. Should there be separation between church and schools? If yes, how about private Christian schools – should they teach or be required to include Sex Education in their curricula?

#### MAIN FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings related to the teaching of Sex Education in Akwa Ibom State schools are discussed in this section. The Research Instrument presented in an earlier section of this paper form the basis of the discussion presented here. Responses to the interview questions along with general discussions which ensued during the interview are combined and synthesized.

#### How do you feel about teaching Sex Education in Akwa Ibom State schools?

In response to the question posed, the general consensus was that Sex Education should be taught in Akwa Ibom State schools since the purpose of Sex and Family Life Education is to help young people accept their sex role and integrate it into a constructive life-style. Such a broad aim becomes viable when most of the behavioral objectives are attained by adolescents. However, since Sex Education is not part of the school curriculum, teachers do not feel comfortable dealing with any topic related to Sex Education. Most of the participants were of the opinion that teachers are reluctant to teach this subject because of socio-cultural and religious factors, lack of teacher training in delivery of Sex Education, as well as lack of motivation. They added, for this much needed reform to take place, teachers must be prepared to discuss the moral implications of such emotion-loaded sexual activities as masturbation, homosexuality, pre-marital intercourse, and abortion.

#### How do we gain support of churches, parents, teachers, and communities at large on including Sex Education in the school curriculum? Should churches intervene?

The respondents alluded to the fact that there should be no cause for alarm in the introduction of Sex Education curriculum into Akwa Ibom State schools so long as the community of parents, clergy, and others understand what sex education is, and what it is not, and what the schools is planning to do. A program that overlooks or ignores parental concerns and community views will definitely not get off the ground. This is because many parents have fears and an appalling amount of misinformation, as well as many personal problems which cause them to be most cautious before lending their support to a new school venture. Finger (2000) maintains that the need for good training goes beyond school-based curricula, and involving parents and community leaders is very important. Attention must be drawn to the fact that there

is: no church pronouncement or position that can be legitimately quoted against Sex Education. There are priests, ministers, and others who are cooperative, even in a conservative locality, especially when they see that the school is also trying to advance acceptable morale and ethical values.

While there was no clear cut response as to the church's intervention, mention was made of the fact that the most acceptable and successful programs which involve explosive and sensitive topics are those which help from the community was obtained in all initial planning sessions. Therefore, the administrators and educators will have to include the clergy, parents, and the community in all aspects of the Sex Education planning process and implementation. Educators will have to advocate for children, our future generations, the general public and safe sex attitudes in Akwa Ibom State. Health Educators should involve the Ministry of Health and use "voices" of influential people in government to advance their cause.

#### **Should the Ministry of Education ignore church politics and go ahead in the implementation of Sex Education programs in schools?**

It was unanimously agreed by all respondents that the Ministry of Education should not ignore church politics in the implementation of Sex Education curriculum in Akwa Ibom State schools. Rather, all spectrum of the community should be brought to the conference table during the planning and implementation process. They were of the opinion that the education authorities concerned should educate the community as to the role played by the introduction of Sex Education into the school curriculum. The respondents asserted that Sex Education in Akwa Ibom State schools is a necessity. It is a way of life in today's world due to increased sexually related diseases with no cures, which leaves Sex Education and Prevention as the only tools to use to fight and deal with the unknown. They added: "parents and the community will have to get involved, voice their concerns when necessary, and exit if they are unhappy or if their demands are not met."

#### **What would you prefer to call this course in Sex and Family Life Education? Where would you like to see it in the school curriculum – as a separate course, part of Health Education, or should it be integrated with other subjects?**

With regards to this question, there were varying opinions as to what the course in Sex Education should be called. The names varied from Human Sexuality, Family Health, Sex and Family Education, Sex and Family Living Education, Sexuality Education, Personal Health Education, Family Education, Personal Ethics, Life Education, to Life and Sex Education. About 30% of the respondents felt that Sex Education should be a separate subject by itself. This is because such move will enable parents decide as to whether or not they would want their children to attend such lessons. Also, such move would not deprive those children whose parents would like them to study Sex Education of such a golden opportunity. Other respondents maintained that placing Sex Education in the Health Education course seems most practical since it fits into the Health Education sequence as one of the major health topics today.

#### **Should teachers get additional training to enable them teach Sex Education in schools?**

It was unanimously agreed by all respondents that in order to introduce Sex Education into Akwa Ibom State's school curriculum, additional professional preparation for teachers in the form of in-service education will be inevitable.

This is because Sex Education might not have been emphasized during their preparations. Additionally, with the advent of various communicable diseases and the development of new technology in the health field, in-service education and continuing education are a sine qua non. Waszak (2000) maintains that training teachers is a key element of successful sex education programs, and the lack of good training has been a big problem. Waszak (2000) adds: "The teachers do not get trained, so they ignore the curriculum or do not know how to deal with it. The training has to desensitize the discomfort the teachers feel in talking about subjects that were taboo when they grew up. And, once you start talking about sexual health with youth, you have to listen to them. You have to deal with their questions, and often, that is not comfortable for teachers." Finger (2000) contends that, for kids to learn skills about negotiating safe sex, teachers have to be comfortable with the content of the curriculum and make it interesting for youth.

#### **Should there be separation between church and schools? If yes, how about private Christian schools – should they teach or be required to include Sex Education in their curricula?**

The respondents were of the opinion that the church, schools, parents, and the community should work hand in hand with one another in the planning and implementation of an effective Sex Education curriculum in both public and privately owned schools in Akwa Ibom State. It is important that teachers who are the chief agents that implement any curriculum in the classrooms know their own feelings concerning sexuality, know the morales and customs of their community, demonstrate a wholesome attitude toward the dignity of man, and show a sincere trust and belief in the integrity of youths.

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

The fundamental problem of sex today is how to reconcile our personal desires and sexual needs with our societal obligations. Sexual behaviors have been regulated in the past by religious teachings which stressed the value of continence, fidelity, and the threat of punishment for sexual sin. Such values were reinforced by three classic deterrents to sex – detection, disease, and pregnancy. These deterrents still prevail today and mold attitudes toward sex and marriage.

Like other adult behaviors and privileges, sex is withheld from adolescents until they accept the rules laid down by society such as clergy, parents, and the community. Even under such circumstances, many parents either do not feel competent or are not prepared to give their teenage children proper guidance. Other parents feel emotionally insecure and inhibited in discussing personal matters with their children. It should be apparent by now that young people have a great need for sex-related information early in their life. Therefore, they seek answers. Just as there are parents who feel such a discussion will open up curiosity doors and do more harm than good (for which there is no evidence), there are others more liberal, who feel that the open forum approach may safeguard youths and help them avoid peer group, mass media pressures, and sexual exploitation.

It is apparent that most parents are unable to meet the needs of their children when it comes to sex-related information. Therefore, the responsibility of this sex-related information should be shifted to the schools. It is true that within many communities, the addition of Sex Education to the school curricula appears to be often blocked by a highly vocal minority. This is because we initiate such programs without

properly preparing the students, parents, the school administrators, the churches, and the community as a whole. Since education is a shared responsibility, all segments of the community must be oriented to the program. One of the best ways of doing this would be to form a school health education council. The family health education community would be a part of this council. Such a council and committee would provide the school with the social machinery that is needed to get acceptance for the program.

Effort should be undertaken to develop a comprehensive health education program that includes Sex Education. By so doing, numerous opportunities will be opened up for the much-needed instruction about personal, family, and community well being. Such an approach would provide numerous opportunities to crystallize and reinforce the value system of youths and make life in the school, the home, and the community more meaningful and worthwhile.

Whether we will meet the needs of the youths and the norms expected of them in society today rests with all of us. Perhaps a redefinition of the concept of Sex Education and the acceptance of the challenges of performing dedicated service for our youths in society will move the issue of Sex Education curricula for all Akwa Ibom State schools from the conference room to the classroom. The implication of this concept is that the responsibility to implement Sex Education curriculum in Akwa Ibom State schools lies with the educational institutions and not with the child's parents and community. Since each new generation is responsible for helping to build the future, it will be necessary to teach youth in terms of moral and ethical values, and run the risk of being controversial somewhere along the way.

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