

Education for a Healthy Future: Integrating Comprehensive Sexuality Education into the School Curriculum

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Background

“A safe, healthy and successful transition from adolescence to adulthood is the right of every child” (UNFPA Strategic Framework 2014-2017). Yet access to quality sexual and reproductive health education for adolescents and youth remains limited in Cambodia.

With youth aged between 10 and 24 comprising 35% of the population, Cambodia is entering a demographic window of opportunity. Without comprehensive knowledge required to make decisions about their sexual and reproductive health, young people are especially vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections, unintended pregnancy, gender-based violence and even rape. Teenage pregnancy also remains a major health concern in Cambodia – 12% of girls aged 15-19 are already mothers¹.

To increase the awareness and knowledge of adolescents on sexuality, UNFPA has been supporting the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport in the development of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education programme in Cambodia, known as the Life Skills Education Programme – Youth and Sexual and Reproductive Health (LSE – YSRH). Implementation of the LSE-YSRH programme began in 2013 in nine provinces, covering approximately 25% of the schools in the country. In view of the success of the pilot project, the programme will now be integrated into the upper primary and secondary school curriculum nationwide.



Additionally, the median number of years of schooling completed among teens aged 15-19 is 7.1 and 6.7 for women and men respectively²; many do not complete secondary school. Hence, from an education perspective, it is crucial to incorporate comprehensive sexuality education starting from the upper primary level to engage as many youth as possible.

Opening the Discussion on Sexuality

The comprehensive sexuality education curriculum is composed of three age-appropriate programmes for students in upper primary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools. It encompasses a wide range of topics, including puberty and reproduction, risk and protective behaviours in relation to HIV and sexually transmitted infections, love and relationships, gender equality, gender-based violence, pregnancy as well as family life.

While pre-marital sex is not common, with only 17% of young women aged 15-19 being sexually active³, changing social norms may be leading to earlier sexual initiation among students aged 13-15. Critical sexual and

Key Facts

- 6% of urban girls and 13% of rural girls begin childbearing before the age of 20⁴
- Percentage of girls beginning childbearing before the age of 20 decreases with increased levels of education⁵
- About 12% of Cambodian students aged 13 to 17 reported they had sexual intercourse⁶
- 1 in 10 Cambodian students in Grades 7-12 reported they consume alcohol. About 16% of students aged 13 to 17 self-reported they had sexual intercourse when they were drunk⁷.
- Only 38% of young women aged 15 to 24 and 46% of young men have comprehensive and correct knowledge of HIV prevention⁸

Sources: CDHS 2014 ^(4,5,6,8), School Health Survey by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) ^(6,7)

reproductive health knowledge gaps, such as in family planning, need to be filled. The Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey 2014 found that only 27% of married young women aged 15-19 used some form of contraception, of which only 19% used a form of modern contraception. Other key issues that need to be addressed include early marriage, teenage pregnancy, unwanted pregnancy and gender-based violence.

Incorporation of comprehensive sexuality education into the curriculum provides an enabling platform for young people to discuss and explore their attitudes and values on this complex topic. By raising awareness and improving understanding in areas with low levels of knowledge identified in baseline surveys (including gender-based violence and specific knowledge on diseases, symptoms, prevention and treatment of STIs), young people can be empowered to make informed and responsible decisions about their sexual health.

Adapting the Curriculum to the Local Context

The curriculum has been developed to be in line with the community's cultural and ethical

values. It reflects real life in Cambodia and targets the sexuality education needs of young people.

Recognizing the sensitivity of these issues, especially among the older generation, the curriculum primarily adopts a rights-based and awareness raising approach while incorporating touches of social realities. However, more work needs to be done to rectify the misconception that sexuality education encourages early engagement in sexual behaviour.

Providing Guidance to Teachers

UNFPA recognizes that teaching sexuality education can be challenging, especially since many teachers themselves have never received formal sexuality education during their schooling. To facilitate this, UNFPA has been supporting a series of cascade in-teacher training workshops to provide guidance on teaching approaches and to allow teachers to familiarize themselves with the course content. The curriculum is also available in the form of a teacher's guide, with step-by-step guided approaches for the classroom.

Envisioning the Future

Ensuring that young people of all backgrounds are able to gain access to sexual and reproductive health education and services is essential. It should, however, be recognized that the comprehensive sexuality education can only target in-school youth. Heightened concerns towards HIV transmission risks remain in view of the increased rates of drug use especially among out-of-school youth. Availability of educational materials out of school may need to be improved in order to reach out to the most at risk youth groups. All in all, the implementation of a comprehensive sexuality education curriculum nationwide represents a significant step taken by Cambodia in addressing the needs and priorities of the younger generation.