

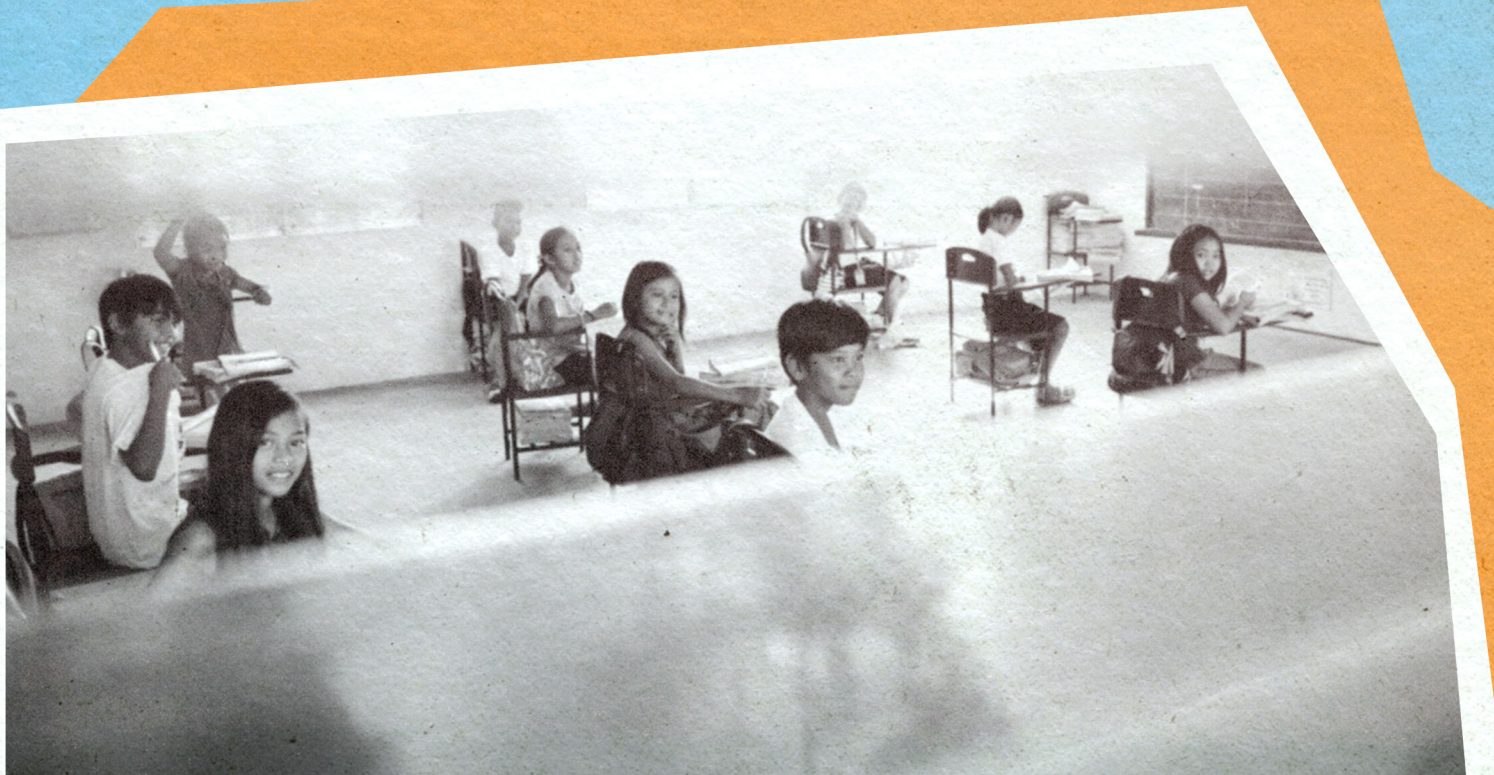
aware 

Reimagining Equality

Sexuality Education
for a Safer Singapore

**A Policy Wishlist From
Students, Parents & Teachers**

July 2021



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Introduction

In the first half of 2021, AWARE organised community discussions with the following groups to share openly about sexuality education in Singapore:

- 17 students aged between 16 and 26 who have undergone sexuality education curriculae from diverse institutions, including government, independent Special Assistance Plan ("SAP"), single-sex, mixed-sex and religiously affiliated schools;
- 10 current and former teachers with different levels of experience teaching sexuality education across the primary, secondary and junior college level; and
- 21 parents of children across all ages who have and will be undergoing sexuality education.

They shared a common interest in ensuring that the government's White Paper on improving gender equality will address sexuality education policies, which have a direct bearing on the attitudes and values of young people in Singapore. Each group provided honest feedback on their experiences with and expectations of sexuality education. As a group, we brainstormed policy recommendations to ensure that sexuality education is relevant, comprehensive and promotes gender equality.

The Current Situation

The Ministry of Education (MOE) conducts sexuality education in schools, starting at the Primary 5 level and progressing to junior college (including Millennia Institute), through science lessons and two programmes known as Growing Years and eTeens.

According to MOE, the sexuality education curriculum is “holistic and secular” and “taught in the context of mainstream national values”¹. MOE’s emphasis on abstinence before marriage has not changed since the curriculum was introduced in 2000.

In recent years, MOE has added to the curriculum concepts such as gender equality, sexual exploitation and abuse, and the importance of respect and empathy for the LGBT community. Teachers must receive special training and meet specific criteria before they are selected to teach sexuality education.

While MOE has emphasised that parents “play the primary role” in educating their children and are responsible for transmitting values on sex and sexuality, a 2020 study by AWARE and Blackbox Research found that less than half (49%) of 564 respondents said they were able to speak to their children about sex in an age-appropriate manner.

¹ According to MOE, the curriculum “promotes abstinence before marriage, and teaches facts about contraception, consequences of casual sex, prevention of diseases, and how to say ‘no’ to sexual advances”

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

A. Students identified the following challenges in the current sexuality education curriculum content:

Consent

Insufficient emphasis on consent and gender-based violence

Sexual abuse

Lack of knowledge and support when they experienced sexual abuse by adults, which they did not realise was wrong and exploitative until much later in life

Victim-blaming

Teachers perpetuating problematic ideas regarding sexual harassment and assault, such as victim-blaming myths

We were not equipped at all to even know what consent is, and how to deal with these real scenarios that have many grey areas.

-Iris, 23, female university student*

If we don't teach girls that they have the power to give or not give consent, how will they learn as adults what to do?

-Karina, 39, female teacher at a female single-sex school*

Lack of consent-focused discussion in schools

I remember being at a bar and a guy touched my buttocks. I froze... I know we were taught to say 'no' in school but when it happens, you don't know what to do. I wish we had discussed strategies for these kinds of situations.

-Cynthia, 20, female polytechnic graduate*

Several students noted that they only learned about the importance of sexual consent after they entered university, which is too late and excludes those who do not attend local universities.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

We need to teach children what is inappropriate touching or grooming by adults so that they know when to speak up and do not have to suffer in silence.

-Nabilah, 24, female university student. She had been sexually assaulted as a child and did not realise it was wrong until much later.*

Insufficient emphasis on child sexual abuse and exploitation:

As a teacher in an all-girls school, I know my students often feel insecure and pressured to have sex by their friends or significant others. We need to talk more about power dynamics in a relationship so that young people understand what is healthy and how to navigate their relationships.

-Tasha, 59, female teacher at a religious school*

Many teachers agreed that power differentials in relationships need to be addressed more robustly to equip students with the knowledge to protect themselves from exploitation by older family members, teachers or other adults.

Teachers perpetuating problematic ideas about sexual assault and harassment:

Yasmin*, an 18 year-old female polytechnic student, shared how a male teacher had joked with the male students in class, while discussing the topic of sexual harassment, about his own experiences catcalling girls. This made her and other female students uncomfortable.

Amira*, an 18 year-old female student, also shared how her teacher had said that "boys will be boys" during a discussion on sexual assault and instructed the female students to dress more modestly to "protect" themselves.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

1

Recommendations

Discuss gender-based violence and foster a strong culture of consent and respect

- Introduce the basic concept of consent to students at the lower-primary level (including who can touch their body, where and in what way).
- Ensure that students can recognise different types of gender-based violence, including family violence, intimate partner violence, child sexual abuse, sexual grooming and exploitation, voyeurism, image-based sexual abuse and other technology-facilitated sexual violence.
- Empower students to seek help if they or someone they know experiences gender-based violence. Discuss and practice how to respond to such situations, including how to approach trusted adults and services that support survivors.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

B. Students highlighted the following challenges regarding the framing of sexual health information:

Sex-negativity

Being taught that sex is a risky and damaging activity that should be avoided because it leads to pregnancy and/or dangerous diseases and destroys one's future.

Contraceptives

Female students remember being shown traumatising videos of abortion procedures, but not being taught ways to prevent pregnancy beyond abstinence and male condom use.

Teachers and trainers perpetuating sex-negative values and stigma against people living with HIV:

I remember we were shown this video where this girl had HIV and everyone shunned her. According to the trainer, the takeaway is that we must abstain from sex or we will get HIV and become ostracised like her. I think that is sending a completely wrong message.

-Shanti*, 23, female university student

We need to move away from the messaging that sexual activity makes one a vector of disease, which can give students the wrong understanding about sex.

-Glen*, 38, male teacher at a junior college

*Is marriage a condom?
Why were we taught that any kind of sex before marriage will lead to all sorts of STIs but sex after marriage is definitely safe?*

-Felice*, 20, female polytechnic student

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

Inadequate discussion on contraceptives and pregnancy:

We were taught how to put on a male condom in school, but I had to learn about other types of contraception like the female condom and the morning-after pill from my friends outside of school.

-Shanti, 23, female university student*

Most students noted that contraceptives were only discussed briefly in the context of a last resort, to prevent unplanned pregnancy and subsequent abortion. The proper use of contraceptives and their role in promoting safe sex was not covered.

2

Recommendations

Destigmatise sex and sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

- Prohibit teachers and trainers from using scare-mongering tactics about pregnancy, abortion, HIV/AIDS and STIs to coerce students into practising abstinence.
- Address sexual health issues from a fact-based perspective, including prevention, testing, treatment and recovery, and provide information on HIV and STI testing and treatment services.
- Provide information and debunk myths about contraceptives, condoms and other ways to prevent unintended pregnancy.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

C. Female students in particular experienced the following challenges:

First period

Lack of guidance from parents and teachers about practical next steps when they got their first period

Menstruation stigma and teasing

Being made fun of or hearing negative remarks about menstruation from classmates or family members

Sexual desire

Needing to rely on the Internet or peers to learn about their bodies and female sexual pleasure

I think I was in Primary 3 or 4 and I had my first period in school. I thought I was having diarrhoea, and I didn't know what to do. I think my teacher had talked about menstruation in science class, but it was only about what happens. We were never told what to do or how to get a pad.

-Jamie, 19, non-binary student*

Lack of knowledge about the first period and menstruation stigma:

I got my first period at home and there was only my dad, so I told him. When I told my mum about it, she was upset that I had talked about this to my dad. It felt like being a woman and experiencing menstruation was something to be ashamed about, that I should hide.

-Alice, 20, female university student*

We were split by gender for the class on menstruation and I remember it felt very secretive and the girls are not supposed to talk about it. We didn't learn how to use feminine hygiene products, which means the boys also definitely did not learn about this.

-Alice, 20, female university student*

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

We don't talk about the female anatomy like the clitoris or the vulva, and many of my female friends don't really know about these things themselves. I had to ask my friend to teach me about these things and then research myself.

-Iris, 23, female university student*

Lack of knowledge about female sexuality:

I wish we learned about masturbation in school. While sex can be for procreation, it is also something we do for pleasure. But we never learn about this and we're made to feel like it is shameful or embarrassing.

-Nabilah, 23, female university student*

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Recommendations

Empower female students to understand reproductive health and sexuality

- Provide practical advice and guidance on menstruation to students in primary school.
- Openly discuss menstruation among students of all genders. Ensure that students can understand and empathise with their peers who experience menstruation.
- Discuss issues like the female anatomy, female sexual pleasure, miscarriage, fertility issues and assistive reproductive technology.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

D. Parents and students raised the following challenges about diverse identities:

LGBTQ students

Feeling unsafe/unwelcome during sex ed classes and unable to seek support from teachers even after reporting bullying.

Children from diverse backgrounds

Parents were concerned that their children might be bullied for choosing to abstain from sex due to religious beliefs, or that they would feel excluded because of different family circumstances, e.g. being adopted.

Shiva, an 18-year-old male student in junior college, shared how a religious teacher gave a lecture to the entire school comparing homosexuality to bestiality. The religious teacher also described how someone he knew had "turned" heterosexual through conversion therapy.*

Robert, an 18-year-old male transgender student formerly from an all girls' school, was bullied for his masculine gender expression but was told by his teacher that what he had experienced was not bullying. He felt alone and unable to find support or safety in school.*

Unsafe and unwelcoming school environment for LGBTQ students:

My kids are adopted and we taught them from a young age that babies can come from their mums but also from other places. We tried to ask the school to also educate the other students about this, but they said that they could not do that because it was against the idea of a nuclear family. I think it's important that we make sure all of our children feel included.

-Ruth, 47, mother of two young children*

I know my children feel excluded because we are a religious family and their friends make fun of them for abstaining from sex until marriage. We should address the peer pressure that our children face and make sure everyone's choices are respected.

-Claire, 49, mother of two teenagers*

Parents' concern about bullying of children from diverse backgrounds:

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

While the government has cautioned that LGBTQ issues are controversial and polarising, parents were largely supportive of fostering a safe and open environment for all children:

While we come from a religious family, I want my children to learn about the LGBT community because I didn't know much about this growing up. We might disagree with this, we can teach our kids at home what is right or wrong, but I believe 'love is love' should be part of sexuality education.

-Wendy, 45, mother of three teenagers*

We need to raise a new generation of Singaporeans who understand LGBT issues. It's a fact of life, and we must have the correct information. Students must also learn that it's not OK to use slurs that are offensive to the LGBT community and schools need to make this stand clear.

-Nadia, 38, mother of two teenagers and one toddler*

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Recommendations

Recognise diverse identities, relationships and families in the curriculum

- Foster respect for different types of identities (sex, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation), family structures (e.g. single-parent family) and romantic relationships (e.g. LGBTQ relationships).
- Educate students on the LGBTQ community, and not to make disparaging remarks against those who do not conform to traditional gender norms.
- Ensure that students respect different choices, including the choice to not engage in sexual activity (due to asexuality, certain religious beliefs, etc.).

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

E. Students shared the following challenges about the information taught during sexuality education, and the manner of teaching:

Unengaging

Students "switch off" in class due to overly basic information and repetition of abstinence messaging.

Irrelevant

Students feel compelled to seek other useful information about sex, sexual health and sexuality from the Internet or their friends.

Unengaging: Focus on imparting information and key messages without deeper engagement

Everyone already knows the basic facts and we can't control what other information students find online. The facilitative role becomes even more important now. We need to shift towards having more open conversations and provide teachers with the pedagogical tools to open up discussion in class with their students.

-Taylor, 30, teacher at a special education secondary school*

Abstinence should not be taught to be the ideal because as long as abstinence is preached, other big issues would not be addressed. Students also lose interest because they already know what you are going to tell them.

-Tasha, 59, female teacher at a religious school*

The few students who found their sexuality education helpful attributed it to teachers who were willing to share and discuss issues beyond the scope of the curriculum.

However, these teachers would warn the students not to let friends from other classes know, to prevent the teacher from getting into trouble.

Challenges Faced by Participants & Policy Wishlist

Irrelevant: Emphasis on abstinence prevents open discussion on other useful information

Students shared that they were unable to gain useful information from sexuality education in relation to contraceptives and sexual health because the curriculum seemed focused on deterring them from any sexual activity at all. Instead, most students turned to the Internet or their friends to learn about sexuality-related issues.

Teachers also shared that they were often unable to discuss or answer students' questions because of the curriculum constraints. While some would direct their students to reliable sources online, most felt frustrated by their inability to fully educate their students and address their concerns or questions.

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Recommendations

Facilitate open discussions with students in sexuality education classes

- Move beyond imparting basic information to students. Empower them to think through issues around sex and relationships in a mature, respectful manner.
- Shift focus beyond abstinence so that teachers have room to address students' specific concerns. Train teachers to facilitate difficult conversations about sensitive topics.

What more can be done?

MOE should revise the sexuality education curriculum to bring it in line with the UNESCO International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education ("UNESCO Guidance").

The UNESCO Guidance promotes comprehensive sexuality education (CSE), which aims to:

- equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to realise their health, well-being and dignity;
- develop respectful social and sexual relationships;
- consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and
- understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives.

There are significant differences between Singapore's current sexuality education curriculum and the UNESCO Guidance, particularly in the areas of gender equality, abuse and exploitation in families and relationships, diverse identities and relationships, and safer sex strategies. In particular, while the current curriculum informs students how they can keep themselves safe, it does not address an individual's responsibilities to keep others safe through consent, bystander intervention and first responder support.

These differences can largely be attributed to MOE's abstinence-only-until-marriage approach to sexuality education, which does not equip students with comprehensive knowledge on sexuality and sexual health. Because students are expected to only engage in sexual activity in adulthood or marriage, they are not provided with the information and resources they need to develop healthy relationships and sexual identities.

Conclusion

Sexuality education is a crucial opportunity to foster the values of gender equality, consent and respect, and a healthy attitude towards sex, among young people. We urge the government to consider these policy recommendations and incorporate them in the forthcoming White Paper.