



JOINT WHO/UNICEF INTERNATIONAL CONSULTATION
ON HEALTH EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Geneva, 30 September - 4 October 1985

*see education
Sri Lanka*



FAMILY LIFE EDUCATION FOR SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

by

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Family Life Education, whether in or out of school, has always engendered mixed feelings among parents, teachers, service providers and policy makers. This duality is sometimes reflected in their personal attitudes being different from those expressed in the open. Often, what they recommend as suitable for others' children is rejected for theirs. The only certainty perhaps is that young people are clear about their own need, and of the reticence of the grown-ups to accept it.

The need, objectives, content, and methods of imparting FLE to young people would be locality and time specific. Allowing for this framework of flux, this paper examines some of the issues involved, and makes some assertions, mainly on the basis of observed facts.

Definition and scope

Although a much vexed question, Family Life Education (FLE) has hitherto defied universally acceptable definition. If the definition were to stem from what "family life" is, the confusion becomes confounded; for family life has been described widely as follows: "All the relationships that affect the family - covering the man and woman in marriage, either or both of them and the children, man and his work, and the children and their friends". The effect such a definition would have on the objectives and content of an FLE programme is obvious.

The diffusion that may result is exemplified by the following. One workshop has outlined the contents of an FLE programme to include aspects as varied as the following: human growth; food and nutrition; environmental health; mental health; safety and first aid; dental health; family and human sexuality; interpersonal relations; rights and responsibilities; and decision making.

It is freely admitted that this kind of broadly-based approach is at times necessitated by negative political and sociocultural environs in which FLE programmes are launched. It may then be argued that the end justifies the means. While admitting the prudence and practical validity of the approach, its inherent dangers must be underlined. It is precisely such width and amplitude of content that is responsible for loss of focus in an FLE programme.

School versus out-of-school programmes

The comparative stress of FLE programmes on the school-goer population as opposed to the out-of-school has to be country- (or even locality-) specific; for it depends on the age and rate of school drop-outs. In the Sri Lanka situation, school entry is universal, and maximum drop-out is at secondary school. (This matter is dealt with in detail later.) The universality of school entry is the basis for a thrust on a wide schools FLE programme in countries like Sri Lanka.

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It is claimed by many school teachers that the eighth grade at school, constituted generally of 14 year-olds, is the most problematic group to handle. Educational administrators' experience has shown that most teachers are decidedly reluctant to take on in-charge assignments of this particular grade. It is believed that this problematic behaviour pattern of the grade 8 students stems from the stage of adolescent development they are going through. It could then be theorized that it is before this stage that the students should be equipped with the knowledge to understand their own body and mind, and during this stage, with the skills to cope with their physical, psychological, and interpersonal stresses. The experimental programme of FLE planned to be launched in Sri Lanka has been greatly influenced by this consideration.

Some behavioural characteristics of Lankan school-goers

A survey was conducted among a group of 343 schoolchildren of both sexes, in grades 7, 8 and 9, with the objective of comparatively assessing their knowledge, beliefs and anxieties pertaining to reproductive health. Done by serving a questionnaire, the items investigated fell broadly into one of three categories.

The first category contained questions of a general nature, correct responses to which could have come from classroom knowledge in biology. The second were of a higher level, and included a knowledge of more personal structure and function, including those of the opposite sex. The third category consisted of areas that were shrouded by commonly held misconceptions and frequently encountered anxieties.

From an analysis of the results of this survey, the following conclusions were drawn:

- (a) There was in the sample population a significant degree of ignorance regarding biological facts, except with regard to the very simple and straightforward ones.
- (b) Factual knowledge of even simple matters of sexuality was poor. The areas in which the situation was better were those in which knowledge was drawn from life experiences.
- (c) There was a sizeable degree of ignorance regarding simple matters of sexual biology pertaining to the opposite sex.
- (d) Misconceptions in the field of sexuality that engender unwarranted anxieties are picked up by young people from their environs, as they grow up. These do not seem to be positively influenced by the formal education they presently receive.
- (e) Some life experiences of young people appear to be examined and evaluated only superficially by them; and it results in continuing ignorance, regardless of the formal education presently received.

Neither is that all. Young people, in general, are seen to gather through social interactions facets of knowledge in sexuality that engender baseless fears and anxieties. Concurrently, they also develop attitudes as a result of which matters pertaining to sex come to be considered unsuitable for discussion. The negative effects of it are obvious.

Along with the phenomena outlined above, another interesting behavioural characteristic was observed in this sample. They were questioned as to whom they would go, on encountering a problem (whatever its nature). Among the seventh graders, a vast majority went to the parents, but the percentage fell significantly at grade 8, and kept at the same level at grade 9. This change of behaviour therefore coincided with the onset of the "problem age" at school referred to earlier. On the other hand, the proportion going to a teacher at grade 7 itself was less than half the total population. It kept the same at grade 8, but fell to almost half that value at grade 9. Loss of confidence that was there even to begin with, seems to have developed intensely in grade 8!

It would be interesting to examine the causality of these characteristics. Is it that, under the existing cultural milieu in Sri Lanka, communication withdrawal from parents occurs around the height of observable pubertal development, namely spermatarche? Is the attitude of teachers towards eighth graders, considering them unmanageable and a nuisance, reflected reciprocally in the school-goers' behaviour, resulting in a loss of confidence?

Enquiry was also made in this survey about the persons to whom these schoolchildren would go when confronted with a problem that has to do with sex. The proportion looking up to parental support and guidance was much lower than in the former instance. What was more striking was the progressive reduction of this proportion over the grades, until among ninth graders it fell to almost zero. The number going to the teachers was only marginally higher; and the drop across the increasing grades was as dramatic.

This information sustenance gap that widened was filled by friends to whom the proportion that went increased remarkably across the grades, both in the case of general problems as well as those connected with sexual matters.

It was an unfortunate omission that in this survey questionnaire, enquiry was not made about the reason why the respondents avoided the sources they did. The explanation now remains speculative. Were the avoided sources considered inadequate in knowledge, communication ability, empathy and feeling, or just temperamentally unsuited? The answer might indicate alternate approaches not only to FLE of the young, but also to education of parents.

It would also be informative to ascertain the category of friend to whom these young people went. There is no data pertaining to that issue in the present survey. One fact, though, could be suspected; some of these friends are likely to be drop-outs from school. If that be so, not only do the friends themselves harbour anxieties, they also propagate and transmit fears and undue anxieties to those in school. The implication of this possibility in the planning of national level Family Life Education programmes is obvious.

The school drop-out

In Sri Lanka, admission to school at the beginning of primary level is almost 100% of the eligible population. Of these, in the whole Island, 8.3% have dropped out at grade 3, 21.6% at grade 5, and 41.8% at grade 8.

If these figures are examined area-wise, a salient fact emerges. The drop-out rate in the cities is almost zero. School drop-out is a feature of rurality and agriculture. In the Sri Lankan scene, the highest rate observed is in the highland plantation sector. If the figures are examined from a socioeconomic perspective, it is observed that early school drop-out is associated with lower socioeconomic grouping - virtually a concomitant of poverty. The relationship may be further extended to argue that these young people who marginate out of the school education system happen also to be the ones who fall back from the onward social streams.

These features pose several problems in the planning of FLE programmes. As far as the schools are concerned in non-urban situations, at least a basis for FLE has to be laid at much lower age-groups than at present. The incorporation of facets in the area of FLE into non-formal and informal educational programmes should be done particularly in those aimed at young people in the agricultural sector, in non-urban situations, and in low socioeconomic settings.

Scrutiny of the existing systems in several countries, certainly that in Sri Lanka, leaves room for concern. In many instances, it is evident that this aspect has been ignored; and in some, whatever the selective stress, it has been in a direction opposite to that dictated by a situation analysis. As is the unfortunate generality, in FLE too, the most needy seem to be the ones by-passed!

Media and sex education

The importance as well as effectiveness of mass media in reaching young people is too well known. Paradoxically, these avenues are ill-exploited, or when exploited, done so with objectives of sensationalism. To the contrary, media should offer not only a means of going forth to the young, but also a channel for coming to know their fears, anxieties and needs.

In response to a series of media programmes conducted in Sri Lanka a few years ago, a large number of young people addressed the communicator, making enquiries about various difficulties they had. It was found that their anxieties mainly centred round guilt feelings about aspects of psychosexual developments, misconceptions regarding the loss of seminal fluid, misguided impressions regarding their own body image, and unfounded fears about the loss of virginity. Uncertainties and fears regarding the process of menstruation loomed large.

The bearing these findings have on the sources of knowledge on sexuality, in the manner perceived and sought after by young people, is clear. The implication the finds have on a suitable curriculum and content package for FLE to be deployed among young people, should be equally clear.

Effects of the local culture

Most concepts pertaining to family life and sexual behaviour are imbibed by the young from their cultural milieu. The other aspect of it is that possibilities of imparting education on these lines, be it in or out of school, is equally controlled by logistic as well as methodological cultural constraints.

In the matter of imparting FLE to the young, most cultures appear ambivalent. At last they are, in the admission of a need for it. While wholly granting the need for a broad education that makes young people fit for a successful adult life, most parents, and even teachers, fight shy of facing its practical implications. It was found in some parts of the world that many parents admitted teenage pregnancy in others' children while being reluctant to admit this possibility among their own. Many parents feely admit the ignorance in matters of sex their children labour under, accept the need to clear such states of ignorance, but think more than once before exposing them to a programme of FLE.

Adult society seems also to be pervaded by another peculiar irrationality in their reluctance to accept sexuality education for their young. Many adults freely accept that sexuality has to be learnt, and that the ability to lead a successful family life is not necessarily an innate skill. Alongside, many adults are not ready to concede the necessity for instruction and sharing of experiences towards that end.

This reticence probably stems from the mistaken notion that sex education necessarily leads to permissiveness; and also that it leads to moral degradation. The basis of adult reluctance may also be their own ignorance of matters pertaining to family life, thereby engendering an unadmitted jealousy, and a repressed fear of exposure of that ignorance.

All this points to a concomitant necessity in the formulation of an approach to FLE of young people. For a programme of this nature to be launched, sensitization of the adult population, the parents in particular, is an indispensable prerequisite. For the sustenance of such a programme, some amount of education of the adult population in this field is imperative.

Political and planning level hindrances

The subject of family life education, with its implied content in human sexuality, is an explosive area in the field of politics. The situation is more so when a society is conservative. It is often the experience that policy makers and planners when accosted at an individual level, and in their personal capacity, do not share the same reticence as they do as bodies and elements of administrative structures.

A similar inertia is come across at high administrative levels. There is not the fear of repercussions from the public, as a lethargy to "rock the boat", with the usually attendant upheavals. On the other hand, some such personnel may be genuinely unaware of the need for family health educational interventions, and of the feelings of young people in this connection. This is an aspect that should not be under-rated.

Experience has shown three mechanisms to be useful in overcoming these policy/administrative obstacles. Firstly, policy on national programmes of this nature could be elevated to a level above that of party politics. This would remove fears harboured by governing politicians that opposing parties, through manoeuvres of distortion, wilful or otherwise, would utilize the liberality allowed by them to undermine their expressed conservatism, leading to a break-down of public confidence.

The second is to make approaches to these individuals at personal levels rather than official. It is well authenticated that behaviours are substantially modified by the environs; and official surroundings are often tradition-bound, and difficult to break through. Besides, the structure of confidence already built by those promoting these activities is more likely to have conducive effects when in an interpersonal setting.

The third way to circumvent these barriers is to adopt a two-tier approach with "gatekeepers" - i.e. those who have the power to open or shut the gates of information and service. The purpose of the exercise is to examine the beliefs of policy makers, administrators and would-be service providers about the need for feasibility, and acceptability of a programme of FLE for young people. Parallel results of a survey done among the target population could then be fed back to this gatekeeper group. This second step is often disarming for the respondents, and conducive to compliance by them.

Content and methodology

One of the main setbacks in the content of FLE programmes is a loss of focus. This diffuseness stems partly from the breadth of definitions of the phrase FLE. It also arises from wilful attempts at "sugar crating".

It is time that FLE be redefined on a basis of the immediate needs of young people. It is also time that the fears and anxieties prevalent among young people be taken into cognizance in the compilation of content areas in FLE programmes. It might, however, be fruitless to rely entirely on the concepts of the prospective learners as to what they need to know; for, with regard to misconceptions and areas that generate anxiety, they are likely to be ignorant of what they need to know.

A survey pertaining to FLE content was conducted among a small group of elderly experienced teachers. There was near unanimity in asserting that male and female reproductive systems, the process of maturation and behavioural changes associated with adolescence, and changes associated with pregnancy should be included in this content. When it came to responsibilities of marriage and parenthood, opinion for and against was equally divided. On further questioning, these veteran teachers said that it would not embarrass them to speak to their pupils about any of these matters, but that it would be very useful for themselves to learn more about the topics.

The teaching-learning process

This is perhaps the area in which the greatest amount of difficulty lies. The grades in which this teaching-learning should occur, the curricular periods in which it should, integration with other subject areas, etc. are all country-, and even locality-specific.

A group of young and motivated teachers were of opinion that these inputs should be within the health curriculum, and if given within a systematic course, should be in the eighth year in school. The danger of the rural school drop-out in such a scheme is glaring. They were further of opinion that these interactions should mostly be of discussion format, stimulated by life experiences. They also felt that teachers in charge of FLE should be selected on personality traits, and specially trained in teaching methodology, while all teachers should be educated in core content. It was the consensus that women teachers, in mixed class situations, would perform better.

Conclusions

- (a) Family Life Education needs a redefinition; such that programmers and learning facilitators do not lose the focus of this exercise.

- (b) It should be recognized that the present biological approach on a traditional curriculum, the teaching of FLE does not serve the ultimate purposes for which the activity is intended.
- (c) The reasons why young people veer away from parents and teachers towards peers needs objective investigation, and reparative action.
- (d) The timing of schools' FLE programmes should take into account the drop-out patterns peculiar to that particular location.
- (e) The content of FLE programmes currently dispensed needs radical revision, bearing in mind the expressed needs of young people, and the anxieties experienced by them.
- (f) A more acceptable methodology for teaching-learning of FLE should be evolved through an action research approach.
- (g) Teacher training and sensitization of parents should be considered urgent needs.
- (h) A model for a "research" programme with the objective of enlisting the support of planners and policymakers needs attention.
- (i) Media personnel require to be sensitized to the need for FLE, particularly with the school drop-outs in view. Media should also be more effectively exploited, not only to educate the various categories of persons referred to, but also as a channel for feed-back from the community.
- (j) Various cultural characteristics, beliefs, fears, etc. that influence the need for, and methodology of, imparting FLE should be studied.

Acknowledgement

The World Health Organization is gratefully acknowledged for its support towards the various projects referred to in this paper.

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