

The Contextualization of *Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools*: Moving Toward a Comprehensive and Competent Sex Education in Hong Kong

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Despite the introduction of the Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools (the Guidelines) as early as in 1997, the implementation of sex education across schools in Hong Kong remained ineffective and even stagnant in the last two decades. Although the government argues that the Guidelines are only for reference, many schools rely on it heavily when designing their own sex education curriculum. Nonetheless, the contextualization of the Guidelines reveals a series of tensions and challenges associated with the school-based development of sex education in Hong Kong. Therefore, with the employment of qualitative documentary analysis, this article aims to contribute to the field by undergoing a critical analysis of the Guidelines as well as other publications related to sex education in Hong Kong and around the world, followed by elaborating on how to fully implement it in a way that could address the challenges arisen from the latest digital media technology, lack of holistic and coherent curriculum planning and design, the paternalistic and top-down learning and teaching approach, insufficient interdisciplinary collaboration, poor or lack of curriculum renewal and evaluation design, and inadequate professional development of teachers. After all, the successful delivery of a comprehensive and competent sex education requires coherent and systematic planning and structuring from the bottom-up, middle-out, and top-down dimensions within a school, which refers to classroom students, frontline teachers, and school curriculum.

Keywords: sex education; civic and moral education; educational policies; curriculum studies; Hong Kong

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Introduction

Definition of Sex Education

Although the meaning of sex education is changing and expanding over time, sex education has always been portraying as a fundamental and pivotal aspect of life-long learning throughout the decades (Goldman & Bradley, 2011). Nonetheless, sex education is a very broad term which covers various yet interrelated aspects of sexual health. According to Unis and Sällström (2020), sexual health as an affirmative concept is associated with the expression of individual and collective needs, human rights, and responsibilities. In line with the World Health Organization (2018), sexual health refers to the state of physical, emotional, mental, and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality. Meanwhile, the Regional Office for Europe and BZgA of the World Health Organization (2010) offers a very succinct definition of sex education as the learning and teaching about the cognitive, emotional, social, interactive, and physical aspects of sexuality. Given the multifaceted and complex nature of sexual health, framing sex education as an important component of the moral and life education is undeniably a challenging task for many educators around the world, especially in Asian societies with strong cultural resistance (Roudsari et al., 2013). Despite the diversity and coexistence of cultures in Hong Kong as an Asia's World City, sex education is still remaining as a highly taboo subject in society, schools, families, and individuals, which are all strongly influenced and bounded by traditional Chinese values (Lai, 2006).

General Situation of Sex Education in Hong Kong

Sex education across Hong Kong schools has still been remaining ineffective and even stagnant in the last two decades. Although Hong Kong teenagers might not be as sexually active as their Western counterparts, this does not necessarily imply the local sex education remains substantial or effective (Andres et al., 2021). In fact, throughout the years, many local teenagers have been exploring, cultivating, and liberalizing their sexuality among themselves within a rapidly changing environment with both localized and globalized influences, which might not be immediately and directly detectable at first glance (Leung & Lin, 2019). This situation is aligned with Li et al. (2009) that the declining age of puberty and sexualization at earlier ages lead many teenagers to explore their own sexuality through

conducting a wide range of sexuality-related behaviors at an earlier stage, for instance, viewing pornography, masturbating, or even starting their very first non-coital and coital sexual contact. Hong Kong is of no exception to this prevalent global phenomenon. Therefore, all these highly worrying trends have led to serious concerns of whether the current Hong Kong sex education is accurate and adequate, so as to shape the expression of sexuality among many of the vulnerable teenagers (Leung & Lin, 2019). According to Andres et al. (2021), the lack of comprehensive and competent sex education forces many Hong Kong teenagers to formulate various isolated and unformed decisions about sex health, which could be largely attributed to excess of flexibility and autonomy for Hong Kong schools in implementing sex education that in some ways might ultimately compromise its efficacy.

Structure and Organization of the Article

In this article, the author mainly argues that the successful delivery of sex education requires coherent and systematic planning and structuring from the bottom-up, middle-out, and top-down dimensions within a school, which refers to classroom students, frontline teachers, and school curriculum. Under the employment of qualitative documentary analysis, the author will first utilize the *Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools* (the Guidelines) as the starting point, followed by reviewing the series of publications related to sex education in Hong Kong and around the world. This article will start by offering an overview of the design and implementation of the Guidelines at the territorial and school levels, followed by analyzing and evaluating the merits and problems of the Guidelines. This subsequently leads to the discussion of how frontline teachers could work to enhance student learning and development in sex education as part of moral and value education, which is quite different from traditional academic learning. The discussion will include various ways to build on existing strengths, and solutions to alleviate the identified issues and overcome the potential challenges. The last part of the article focuses on highlighting the implications of the aforementioned discussions on the professional development of teachers. It is hoped that this article can shed light on moral and value education by offering a systematic, detailed, and most crucially, the latest discussion of the effectiveness of the sex education designed and implemented in Hong Kong.

Contextual Background

Development of the Guidelines

According to the Research Office of Legislative Council Secretariat (2018), the incorporation of sex education into the Hong Kong curriculum could be tracked back to 1971. At that time, the then Education Department issued a memorandum to all schools. It requested all schools to include sex education topics in their standard subjects and offered a succinct list of suggestions on what could be taught. Nonetheless, it was not until 1986 when the Education Department issued the *Guidelines on Sex Education in Secondary Schools*, which includes more detailed suggestions regarding the topics, resources, and references for advocating the implementation of sex education programs in secondary schools. A few years later, a revised set of Guidelines, known as the *Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools* are prepared by the Education Department in 1997. This is an important attempt to further strengthen the implementation of sex education in schools across the territory. This 75-page Guidelines mainly focuses on comprehending sex and relevant relationship responsibilities for attaining a fruitful life. The introduction of the Guidelines aims to curb the widespread and acceleration of a wide range of sex problems, especially unlawful sexual intercourse, unwanted pregnancy, induced abortions, and sexually transmitted diseases, brought by the inappropriate sexual attitudes and behaviors among the increasing sexually active younger generation. All these are constituting a demonstrable and significant risk to the long-term personal development of teenagers in Hong Kong (Information Services Department, 2017). Fok (2005) makes an important remark that the Guidelines reflects the gradual and progressive changes in social values, which subsequently lead to the development of far more open sex education in Hong Kong.

Details of the Guidelines

The Guidelines is a significant kickstart of sex education in Hong Kong since it offers a conceptual framework relating to various aspects of human sexuality and gears more toward gender education, which targets at pre-primary to senior secondary students (Curriculum Development Council, 1997). Meanwhile, it provides many content topics with relevant teaching and learning strategies across five distinctive yet interrelated dimensions, including: (a) human development; (b) health and behavior; (c) interpersonal relationship; (d) marriage and family; (e) society and culture (Curriculum Development Institute, 2005). The content of sex education presented by the Guidelines does not limit to factual information, but also

a set of appropriate attitudes, skills, and values that are practically oriented. Fok and Tung-Cheung (2000) comment that there is now an increasing attention paid on sex equity, gender roles, and human rights in the Guidelines. According to the Research Office of Legislative Council Secretariat (2018), the government anticipated that a coherent and structured learning process of sex education helps students: (a) acquire accurate and comprehensive knowledge about sexuality and the consequences of sexual behavior; (b) explore attitudes toward sex, marriage and family; (c) develop better decision-making and communication skills related to relationships and sexuality; and (d) cultivate positive values and responsible behavior. As the blueprint, the Guidelines facilitates individual schools to initiate their own student-centered principles, policies, and means of sex education curriculum (Information Services Department, 2006). In fact, many research literatures (e.g., Igor et al., 2015; Kantor & Levitz, 2017) in the field have shown that school-based sex education is essential as both parents and children think that schools always possess abundant resources, professional training, and strong commitment to the delivery of a common curriculum for students from diverse social backgrounds. Therefore, schools need to formulate tailor-made initiatives and strategies to actualize sex education.

Ongoing Implementation Gaps and Issues

Great Discrepancies in Interpretation and Implementation

The Hong Kong government keeps reiterating that the Guidelines is designed as reference material for schools rather than as official curriculum that normally drawn up for academic subjects, meaning that schools possess the autonomy to balance school philosophy, student needs, and social expectations (Panel on Education of Legislative Council, 2018). Nonetheless, the highly flexible school-based approach often results in uneven and inconsistent standard of implementation of sex education in reality (Blundy, 2017). Currently, many Hong Kong schools are still employing an intimidating or abstinence-favoring approach, which might be neglected by students who have already realized those sex-associated risks and pleasures (Ng & Zhang, 2018). Meanwhile, a number of schools intend to impart sex education through informal curriculum, such as talks, seminars, debates, exhibitions, and adventure-based training camps commissioned to non-governmental organizations with varying stances and approaches (e.g., The Family Planning Association of Hong Kong, Breakthrough, and Women's Commission), or at most some form-teacher sessions and assemblies that are of limited and piecemeal exposure

(Research Office of Legislative Council Secretariat, 2018). Although some schools attempt to integrate sex education across their formal cross-curriculum, the dedicated lesson hours and content remain inadequate and scattered as they are subject to the discretion of individual subject teachers who may not have the underlying skills or motivation to impart sex education. Since academic achievement often outweighs whole-person development in the competitive local education system, there is a relatively strong impression that sex education is not treated as a prominent and serious subject in the school curriculum as it is not an examination subject (E. Cheung, 2015). Although the Guidelines state that schools must have at least seven hours of sex education annually, sex education is still largely inadequate in the recent years, especially under the limited learning and teaching hours under the suspension of face-to-face school classes brought by the various successive waves of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (Fung, 2021). Some critics even think that although the provision of sex-related information might enhance knowledge and skill related to prevention, it does not necessarily translate to a substantial change in actual behavior, which reveals a value-action gap in sex education (Leung et al., 2019).

Poor or Lack of Curriculum Renewal and Evaluation Design

The Hong Kong government is not aware of how sex education is implemented across schools and how effective the task is accomplished when rigorous assessment and persistent review are still largely missing (Information Services Department, 2009). The then Education Department have conducted three cross-sectional surveys among secondary schools in 1987, 1990, and 1994 respectively to inquire into how the *Guidelines on Sex Education in Secondary Schools* issued in 1986 were implemented across schools. They reported that the coverage of sex education is far too narrow, given that many schools avoided the most sensitive areas in discussion (Fok, 2005). In the 2012–2013 school year, there was another territory-wide survey conducted by the government in comprehending the situation of life skills-based education on HIV/AIDS and sex among junior secondary school students. It reported several major barriers in providing sexuality education among schools, especially in terms of packed school schedule, low perception of priority, inadequate documented policy, and insufficient trainings and resources. Nonetheless, this is the latest publicly available comprehensive information regarding the implementation of sex education across local schools. Since then, there are no further formal and large-scale government-led evaluation studies regarding sex education, not to mention any attempt to offer professional suggestions for the delivery of sex education (Research Office of

Legislative Council Secretariat, 2018). Meanwhile, the difficulty of evaluating program effectiveness is further increased under the current school-based development practices among Hong Kong schools, meaning that there are a wide range of different topics, designs, and approaches employed in delivering sex education across schools. In short, schools and teachers can have their own ways in interpreting and realizing the Guidelines, whereas such diversities lead to difficulties in subsequent measurement and evaluation. Although many of these findings indicated that Hong Kong sex education have to be further strengthened through evidenced-based practices, the paradox is that continuous and specific evaluations and interventions remain largely inadequate. Nonetheless, the use of evaluation studies with the aid of meaningful indicators and rigorous methodologies, and replication studies to verify the positive findings of sex education initiatives, are essential to help inform the delivery (Leung et al., 2019).

Diverse Perceptions Among Stakeholders

Necessity of Updating the Discrete and Outdated Guidelines

Some Hong Kong politicians criticize the Guidelines published around 25 years ago being obsolete and biased, which leads to the stagnant development of local sex education (Chan, 2016). To them, the concepts in the Guidelines have failed to equip students with the necessary knowledge and dispositions in the evolving technological world of depreciating moral attitudes. Therefore, they keep asking the authority in various channels to review and replace or update the content (Luo, 2018). Meanwhile, Fong and Chan (2018) comment that the Guidelines should be updated to better reflect the needs of the larger society, and to encourage the schools to adopt a liberal and comprehensive approach in delivering sex education. Nonetheless, the Hong Kong government describes the Guidelines as a historical document, and refutes the necessity to introduce sex education as a mandatory and independent subject, especially when different dimensions of it are holistically and thoroughly embedded into relevant Key Learning Areas (e.g., Personal, Social, and Humanities Education and Science Education) and school subjects (e.g., General Studies for primary students, Life and Society for junior secondary students, as well as Liberal Studies, Biology, and Ethics and Religious Studies for senior secondary students) as cross-curriculum learning since the launch of the learning-to-learn curriculum reform in Hong Kong in 2000 (K. Cheung, 2018). Currently, sex education constitutes one important part of the Moral, Civic, and National Education which targets at promoting whole-person

development with the cultivation of a wide range of positive values and attitudes among students in Hong Kong. Under the revised Moral and Civic Education curriculum framework in 2008, those contents relating to sex education mainly include gender awareness, respecting others, protecting the body of oneself, getting along with the opposite sex, handling the sex impulse, and dealing with social issues relating to sex (Research Office of Legislative Council Secretariat, 2018). Nonetheless, Fung (2021) mentions that some major themes, such as puberty, contraception, and sex and the law, were even removed from the updated framework. At the same time, Fong and Chan (2018) comment that since 2009, there are no other significant changes made by the government in terms of revising the Guidelines or other frameworks for teaching sex education.

Potentials of Maximizing Innovations Under the Official Guidance

When it comes to approaching sex education, many busy and unexperienced Hong Kong teachers endorse the visionary Guidelines in offering detailed and systematic guidance on the essential elements covered at each sex education stage, which help better synthesize and present the diverse sex-related information (Equal Opportunities Commission, 2019). This also indicates the deep-seated checklist mentality among teachers in treating sex education as another objective-oriented and product-based curriculum. It seems that to many teachers, authentic and meaningful learning and teaching of sex-related content should be reduced to something tangible and measurable. Their inadequate sex education training and experience hinder them from approaching it in a systematic and creative manner (Leung Ling & Chen, 2017). Lamentably, such mentality neglects the open and spontaneous nature of sex education, and the original stimulating function incorporated into the Guidelines. This also undermines the fundamental fact that the ultimate learning experience always remains open and can be very different for each student, whereas the outcomes hinge on individual activity and unique interpretation. In fact, the very purpose of the official introduction of the Guidelines is like offering both teachers and students a mutual knowledge base and intellectual experience in approaching sex education. Under this interpretation, they should regard the Guidelines as the starting point rather than the ultimate point of their learning and teaching, especially when the Guidelines itself can never automatically and naturally get one engaged in broad and deep learning regarding sex education (Leung et al., 2019).

Original Intentions and Rationales

Balance Between Central Policymaking and School-based Development

As a clear and coherent theoretical framework, the Guidelines is very helpful in terms of guiding curriculum planning and design in sex education among Hong Kong schools. It sets the learning targets and guarantees the standards of students at various learning stages. The Guidelines offers teachers a series of sex-related theories and concepts as the substantive and syntactic content knowledge, and relevant instructional methods as the pedagogical content knowledge, which help facilitate student understanding of bridging the underlying gaps in the acquisition of sex-related information (Shulman, 1986, 1987). This helps minimize teachers to continue relying their own partial or biased learning experiences in approaching sex education, which can hinder students from attaining a holistic and competent learning experience (Grossman, 1990). Meanwhile, this facilitates teachers to become skilled and trusted source of sex-related information inside the classroom. According to Yeung (2012), in Hong Kong, the long-standing school-based approach of delivering sex education empowers teachers with the freedom and autonomy throughout the entire curriculum decision-making process. This is also in close alignment with the intended open and flexible nature of the design of the Guidelines. Teachers are strongly encouraged to structure and deliver learning experiences at various paces, modify the depth and breadth of learning content, and flexibly implement various learning and teaching initiatives and strategies to maximize the effectiveness. As a result, the professional knowledge of educational contexts among teachers can be fully utilized when contextualizing, deliberating, and formulating a sex education curriculum that best satisfies the school culture and student needs (Shulman, 1986, 1987). Meanwhile, it ensures that curriculum planning remains coherent, but not overlapped or crowded, and continuous across all schooling levels. While the fundamental and connected concepts required for sex education are highlighted in the Guidelines, there are sufficient spaces for teachers to bring in their own cases, examples, and experiences which can cater to their own students' learning abilities, interests, and environment. As a result, teachers can review elements of teaching and learning from time to time, which makes it adaptive to continuous changes and updates.

Interconnections Among Knowledge, Skills, as well as Values and Attitudes

A thorough and balanced sex education can better socialize students with the norms of independence and universalism, especially when adolescence is a crucial developmental stage of both physical growth and sexual maturation (Dreeben, 1968; Feinberg & Soltis, 2004). It is believed that when students cultivate high respect and responsibility with regard to sex, they might better have sensible sexual relationships and protective behavior. Therefore, all students are taught to be capable of asserting their own principles, and formulating informed and responsible decisions for themselves. This also justifies the deliberate inclusion of a list of positive values and attitudes in the Guidelines, which helps refine and support the independent reasoning and critical thinking of students. Students can learn to cultivate their own analytical capacity and capability to deal with the huge number of sexual messages from the indecent magazines and irresponsible media when the flow of information becomes fast and free in the globalized era. All these can avoid them from being influenced by the series of substantial and irreversible consequences brought by their insufficient or incorrect sexual knowledge, such as engagement in unprotective sex and underage sexual intercourse, as well as misuse of contraceptive methods (Blackman, 2004; B. C. O. Ho & Wong, 2006). According to Maimunah (2019), the delivery of sex education should start as early as possible when many children in the contemporary generation are developing much earlier and sexual activity starts early at the same time. Meanwhile, the earlier the children get contact with sex education, the much easier for them to regard them as normal matters and subsequently adopt an open attitude for exploration. On the other hand, if schools merely start teaching these matters and developments during late adolescence, many students would have already experienced various bodily changes, while some others would have little time and space to get themselves ready for adapting to the rapid changes that they are going to undergo (Haberland & Rogow, 2015).

Prevalent Difficulties and Challenges

Lack of Readiness for Actual Implementation Among Teachers

Although Hong Kong teachers are granted with high degree of autonomy and flexibility in approaching sex education under the support of the Guidelines, many of them are still not competent and confident in teaching the demanding sex curriculum under the nature of

schooling that they themselves have experienced and have been trained for throughout the years. This also reflects that the pedagogical content knowledge of sex education as supported by the Guidelines remain general and shallow (Fok, 2002). Under the lack of relevant and proper trainings, classroom discussions often remain at the surface and superficial transmission of various sex-related factual knowledge as illustrated throughout the Guidelines. The dominating didactic and teacher-driven approach of delivering sex education across classrooms in Hong Kong lacks any authentic and experiential learning experience. This cannot equip students with the relevant skills and dispositions to deal with different real-life scenarios that are far more complicated. Most importantly, teachers often fail to articulate the underlying and more crucial psychological and ethical dimensions of many issues, such as the dimension of gender identity and equality (Mkumbo, 2012). At the same time, some of these critical issues are easily to be avoided and stigmatized due to the cultural background and religious belief of some schools in Hong Kong under the school-based management, which undermine the equal learning opportunities among those sexual and ethnic minority students (Winstanley, 2014). In fact, this is a very problematic issue in the delivery of sex education. The significant knowledge gaps in sex can easily arouse the curiosity of many students, and they might subsequently turn to other undesirable materials, such as pornography information on the Internet, for further exploration yet without close guidance and appropriate instructions. Worse still, these underage teenagers often underestimate the possible dangers of all these information and many of them do not realize that this can be highly addictive. As a result, they might cultivate the habit of consuming these types of sex-related information in a continuous manner and start digging more once they have attained their very first experience among themselves. Furthermore, many conservative Asian students feel uncomfortable and embarrassed to discuss these highly sensitive and intimate matters, such as sexual abuse, sexual relations, as well as condoms and contraception, under the lack of open and non-judgmental classroom environment. A further complicating factor to this situation is the mixed-gender classroom that is prevalent in Hong Kong. Many students often feel slightly unnatural to discuss sexuality and reproductive health issues specific to male or female students in the presence of the opposite sex (Fok, 2005; Odlum, 2012). Nonetheless, the paradox is that mixed-gender encounters are still inevitable beyond classrooms. While students eventually still need to learn how to cultivate healthy mixed-gender relationships as one of their development tasks, classroom might be a more supportive and protective learning environment (Wong et al., 2018).

Homogenous and Top-Down Learning and Teaching Approaches

Despite the official rhetoric of offering learner-centered sex education, students are still not properly attended to their emotional experiences and thinking as integral parts of human sexuality, given the lack of readiness among many of the frontline teachers (Parker et al., 2009). The oversimplified sex education across Hong Kong schools leads the school-based curriculum more consistent with the academic rationalist rather than child-centeredness vision of schooling (Schiro, 2013). As a result, the delivery of sex education has long been following the line of a more conservative and biological approach. Although the Guidelines helps students cultivate better understanding and awareness in relation to sexual health, this does not automatically ensure their optimal age-appropriate growth in sex-related dimensions, especially when the focus remains corrective and remedial rather than active and developmental (Cok & Gray, 2007). According to Pilcher (2004), such line of thinking seems to concern more about manipulating the sexual morality of students, instead of embracing changing attitudes toward sexuality. This subsequently fails to resolve the ongoing dilemma among teachers when approaching sex-related matters, which is filling the strong curiosity and desire of students as promoting sexual health while preventing them from delving into indecent and pornographic materials as upholding sexual morality (Iyer & Aggleton, 2015). Most importantly, students cannot cultivate a strong sense of agency and self-efficacy through engaging in sex education, which are nonetheless necessary elements for one to attain a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships as suggested by the World Health Organization (2018). The nature of sex education is different from many other subjects as it can naturally and easily touch upon and arouse strong emotions, reactions, and feelings among students (Pound et al., 2016). Therefore, if students feel that their contributions to the classroom discourse could be taken carefully and seriously, they can cultivate the confidence that is necessary to explore new and open ways of expressing themselves genuinely and sincerely.

Failed Embracement of Inclusion and Diversity for the Sexual Minorities

Some opponents even further subject the theoretical framework of the Guidelines to extensive discursive and ideological critique by criticizing its heterosexist views of sex education, which mostly exclude and marginalize sexual minority students as they are unable to position and connect themselves to the learning and teaching process. In order to

avoid themselves being perceived as abnormal or even deviant by their counterparts, these minority students will not express their non-conforming perceptions and practices (Robinson, 2005). The idea of heterosexism is also seemingly normalized and institutionalized via sex education as reflected by the fact that concepts like marriage, parenthood, and family are still dominated as the core values to be treasured under the contemporary sex education curriculum (Shannon, 2016). While the Guidelines claims to cultivate positive attitudes, values, and analytical capacity in students, its underlying assumption might still be sex-negative to some extent as shown by its focuses on deterring students from accessing pornography, unprotective sex, and misuse of contraceptive methods. Such a risk-driven and morally oriented approach would exclude lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (or sometimes questioning), and others (LGBTQ+) from attaining a positive understanding of sexual pleasure, and hinder them from enjoying and expressing their sexuality according to their genuine developmental needs (Kwok & Lee, 2018). Meanwhile, the Guidelines fails to recognize sexuality as a basic and positive human potential, which requires sex education to be positive and inclusive, regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation (Allen, 2005; Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014). According to Kwok and Kwok (2021), Chinese sexual and gender minority students have very negative feelings toward the sexuality education they are currently receiving at schools. All these include being left out as the transgender information are either completely omitted or actively silenced; being terrified and distressed as they are being misgendered and misinformed when discussing forthcoming physical changes to their bodies during puberty; as well as being outraged when sexual and gender diversity are being perceived as pathological and sinful. Therefore, a rights-based approach is crucial for empowering sexual minority students by acknowledging their diverse experiences and offering them inclusive information.

Critical Issues of Contextualization

Inadequate Holistic and Coherent Curriculum Planning and Design

The problem of approaching sex education among teachers is merely a manifestation or even a by-product of the much larger phenomenon of the skewed planning at school levels. Since there is a lack of overarching vision and systematic planning with regard to sex education within the school, there will be an increasing number of fragmented sex-related initiatives emerging in the future (Handelzalts et al., 2019). Under such a loosely coupled structure, there are no linking and looping narratives across all these initiatives. Many of the

initiatives are somewhat associated with sex education as an educational ideal, but without any concrete exposition and clear coherence. Worse still, students are often left to process and make sense of the value and importance of all these initiatives among themselves. Therefore, they can barely understand how various components are inherently combined together as a thorough and competent sex education across the formal, informal, and hidden curriculum, which should be multiple and cumulative (Goldman, 2010). It becomes easy for students to become confused or even reluctant in terms of pursuing their sexual health through the sex education as offered by their schools and teachers. Meanwhile, the neglect of clear and smooth lateral coherence across initiatives and vertical progression throughout years fail to ensure that the curriculum planning is following the psychosocial development and acquired experience among students as means for catering for learner diversity (Unis & Sällström, 2020). Although the Guidelines demonstrates the strong desire and determination of the authority to initiate change in sex education, they remain slightly symbolic rather than genuine. The generic top-down Guidelines has very limited influences on the implemented curriculum as frontline teachers receive minimal guidance and support throughout the delivery of sex education as part of the policy implementation process (Morris, 1996; Morris & Scott, 2003).

Under the lack of central coordination and strategic guidance, teachers might be compelled to interpret their own roles and responsibilities in the actual design and implementation of sex education in their own school settings. As a result, they might continue working on different assumptions under varying or even conflicting perspectives, which make them difficult to collaborate or compromise in the long run (Tam, 2015). All associated uncertain and vulnerable impressions brought by their continuous trial-and-error processes in approaching sex education might impede their underlying desire and subsequent effort to advance further when putting forward any relevant sex-related educational innovations (Paniagua & Istance, 2018). Meanwhile, they can easily resort back to the employment of more traditional and conservative approaches for self-reassurance in the future. Worse still, in order to take the easiest way out, some teachers might even oversimplify or even ignore the complicated matters involved in sex education, which is in stark contrast with the everyday reality. This is simultaneously sending a wrong signal to the students in the classroom. All these explain why sex education across Hong Kong schools, when compared to many other learning and teaching areas falling under the umbrella of value education, such as media and information literacy education as well as education for

sustainable development, still remained largely ineffective and even stagnant in the last two decades.

Important Roles and Responsibilities of Teachers

Facilitation of Student-led Discussion in the Classroom

Under the popularization of the cyberworld, students are becoming more vocal and honest in sharing their intimate experience and individual beliefs, and seeking peer advice through anonymous sex-secret platforms across social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Instagram). Many of them tend to avoid sex-related issues among their daily conversations due to concerns of social stigma and personal image. Instead, they are inclined to go online and ask if their individual sexual situations are “normal” or socially acceptable (Yeo & Chu, 2017). Nonetheless, teachers should be careful in utilizing these materials to address the inadequacies of current sex education, so as to avoid turning them as encouragement of casual sex. Since contemporary teenagers are by no means sexual innocents, teachers should first better recognize their sex-related cognition, misunderstanding, and behavioral patterns, followed by exploring various innovative pedagogies that are responsive to their needs and expectations. An effective sex education should always be delivered in the voice and tone of teenagers, which reflects their concepts and perceptions, and offers accurate and credible information at the same time (Strasburger & Brown, 2014). All these wide-ranging and ever-changing bottom-up narratives are connecting with their perceived sexual norms and broader sexual cultures, which can be immediately adapted to contextualize and strengthen the top-down discussions embedded throughout the Guidelines and other scholarly materials (Holman & Sillars, 2012). Meanwhile, this allows teachers to keep in close pace with the ever-advancing technology and get rid of the potential generation gaps with students. Most importantly, these discussions often touch upon a series of sensitive topics and issues, such as sexual behavior, sexual rights, contraception and prevention of unwanted pregnancies, which are barely found among standard learning and teaching materials prepared by the authority. This helps avoid teachers enforcing a particular form of normal sexuality or portray sex merely in terms of threats and risks, but really facilitates students as agents who determine their own sexual health. It also goes far beyond the unilateral attainment of formal sex-related information through reading these online platforms by students themselves (Iyer & Aggleton, 2015). The same logic applies to the incorporated discussion of sexual identities and gender issues when a lot of LGBTQ+ sexual minority students are still constantly

struggling under the dominating and heterosexist interpretation of sex education in society and across schools, such as reproduction, contraception, and safe sex. Therefore, their visibilities and inclusiveness should be further enhanced, and the binary values and social oppressions against them should be challenged through sex education. This requires taking their unique needs and situations into account and incorporating as a part of the content of sex education (Kwok & Lee, 2018).

The teacher intervention in the classroom of sex education is never suppressing or condemning their sexual pleasure, but embracing them as the actively constructed realities of students for debunking self-perpetuating myths and introducing evidence-based discussion (Marques et al., 2015). Therefore, teachers should first personalize the meaningful and respectful classroom interaction with the dialogic approach in creating equal and open spaces for diverse voices based on these authentic and sensitive cases. They can exploit these student-centered insights and scaffold students to undergo deeper reflection and assimilation among themselves. In fact, during adolescence, classroom peers as the more significant others become more crucial for students to seek for acceptance and recognition. Students can benefit from the non-threatening social environment created by themselves, which allow them to further bring in mutual reflection in addition to individual reflexivity (Kenten, 2010). Most crucially, these lessons built upon the online peer dialogues allow students to create a sense of identification and relate themselves to all these authentic “similar others” in terms of mutual background, viewpoints, and experience (Yeo & Chu, 2017). Their own understanding is advanced when students are building on and linking to the responses of their counterparts. This allows them to improve their ideas and deepen their discourses, which is not simply focusing on individual learning and outcomes (Wegerif, 2013). When approaching sex education, teachers as the only adults in the classroom should establish trust and rapport with students as teenagers by communicating availability, acceptance, and love (Mortimer & Scott, 2003). Meanwhile, teachers need to strike a balance between clarifying the reflective process and avoiding the imposition of structures to confine any reflection. They need to offer relevant guidance and support based on understanding the conceptions, motivations, and anxieties of their students. In the long run, this can alleviate the student concern of confidentiality and stigma in disclosing sensitive sex-related self-information to one another in classrooms (Kendall, 2013).

Consensus-building Among Different School Teachers

The delivery of sex education is a collective responsibility across all parties within

Hong Kong schools. Therefore, there should first be explicit, clear, and long-term motivating visions, goals, and objectives formulated at the outset, so as to settle, consolidate, and deepen to achieve desirable results. The provision of a holistic picture regarding sex education can minimize the variations in terms of the pace and extent of alignment among and within schools, which is nonetheless very common under the dependence on priorities and judgments of individual teachers (Zulu et al., 2019). After all, the recognition and acknowledgment of the importance and values of sex education within the school curriculum should be the prerequisite for its ultimate success, followed by working out the specific learning and teaching strategies. Since the nature of sex education is also fundamentally interdisciplinary, all subject teachers within schools should always gather to formulate a collaborative interdisciplinary learning community to carefully outline the overarching landscape and mutual discourse for their own sex education curriculum. This also requires teachers to build on the distinctive strengths and unique contexts of their respective schools (E. C. K. Cheng, 2015). Throughout the process, teachers are discovering and exploring different ways of thinking and inquiring, and looking for patterns and relationships of meanings, which are incorporated within and across disciplines. As when these sex-related discussions are identified and emerged, teachers will realize the limits of unidisciplinary thoughts and expand their perspectives through the examination of alternative ways of describing, conceptualizing, and evaluating.

On the fundamental basis of the Guidelines offered by the authority, at the school level, teachers should come up with several guiding beliefs and principles that outline the scene for deliberation and decision-making, and ensure consistency with the overall directions and alignment with one another for every teaching and learning move across different school stages, academic years, and stakeholders. By then, these teachers with diverse epistemological background and clear labor division can regularly explore the topic coverage, brainstorm the relevant strategies, design classroom learning artifacts, review classroom teaching, share their unique experience, offer continuous support, and learn from one another (Graham, 2007). On the one hand, if sex education is chosen to be delivered in a separate manner, these teachers could consider how to complement one another based on the understanding of their specialized disciplines and distinctive strengths, which helps maximizing the learning experience among students. On the other hand, if sex education is integrated into different subjects, these discussions have to ensure that their approaches are closely aligned with one another, such that any overlapping or missing of content could be avoided. They can also consider how sex education could be delivered in an appropriate and natural manner without

compromising the attention to and the learning outcomes in their respective subjects (Zulu et al., 2019). These regular and systematic interdisciplinary collaborations among frontline teachers can always expose unquestioned assumptions and facilitate the discovery of alternative strategies in approaching sex education.

Ongoing Renewal and Evaluation of the Program Implementation

Without a common interpretation of sex education within schools, it remains difficult for teachers of varying background to come up with mutually agreed means and outcomes of measurements regarding many of the embedded curriculum requirements. The diversity as the core spirit of sex education is still a challenge for one to conduct a comprehensive assessment over the curriculum. On the one hand, if students are invited to reflect on their individual experiences and predict their future behaviors based on what they have learned, the problem might be that the predictions can have little to do with actual actions. On the other hand, if relevant components and initiatives are evaluated on a case-by-case basis, one may miss the point of considering the overall curriculum goals in a holistic manner. Moreover, assessing perspectives or ideas is slightly challenging as all curriculum components can take very different routes to accomplish the same outcomes. Nonetheless, all curriculum decisions, including sex education, should always be professionally driven, which involves defensible ground and solid evidence, rather than speculative beliefs and individual assumptions (Schildkamp, 2019). After all, the shaping of sex education curriculum is a continuous and dynamic improvement process. Therefore, teachers need to prepare comprehensive, rigorous, and longitudinal quality assurance mechanisms, including quantitative and qualitative, which commence from planning to evaluating, so as to further inform discussions, adjustments, and renewal (Y. C. Cheng, 2003). Schools need to first centralize and make accessible all existing underused raw data with associated methodologies in context and with caution, and share with teachers to inform further discussions and actions. Meanwhile, the focus on student evaluations must be incorporated with a wide range of methods like pre-course and post-course assessment, classroom observation, and reflective portfolios. Only by doing all these can schools further recognize, professionalize, and reward the volume and quality of activities dedicated to teaching and learning in relation to sex education. This can also better accommodate the needs, expectations, and progress of students as the genuine curriculum users, especially the nature of sex education can generate unintended and unstructured learning outcomes that go beyond or deviate from the original goals, which should guide and facilitate the future

planning (Rodwell, 2020). Furthermore, there should be a readily accessible database that documents all these promising evidence-based practices in delivering sex education for further references.

Implications on Professional Development of Teachers

Enhancement of Professional Capacity and Teacher Training Opportunities

A single kind of professional development activities do not work to satisfy all the demands of delivering sex education successfully. Therefore, teachers need to undergo reciprocal development of their epistemic and context-based knowledge, which are dimensions that are not well addressed by the outdated and academic Guidelines (Shulman, 1986, 1987). All prospective and serving Hong Kong teachers can take part in a wide range of training programs offered by the authority and non-governmental organizations. All these allow them to understand the most updated knowledge of sex-related topics, and experience various gender-responsive and participatory pedagogic approaches, followed by adapting and transferring them into classrooms in an interesting and motivating manner (S. Y. Wood et al., 2015). They can also meet many other frontline colleagues to share and discuss their struggles and strategies when addressing disruptive behaviors, managing classroom dynamics, and discussing sensitive topics. Meanwhile, teachers should maintain close and continuous conversations with other colleagues and the parents, so as to better understand the daily behaviors of students, which best reflect the peculiarities, needs, and conceptions of students as their psychosocial competencies (Hiebert & Morris, 2012). While teachers are remaining self-critical and pondering the most appropriate pedagogies that support their learning and teaching activities in relation to sex education, they are improving their own classroom simultaneously and seamlessly. Teachers can also become more prepared, competent, and confident in approaching sex education, especially that sex education is likely the most sensitive yet highly important topic in moral and value education.

Improving the instructional methods that are implemented across classrooms is often undermined throughout various educational discussions, especially for curriculum in moral and value education without the so-called best learning and teaching approach. This overarching goal can be achieved through sharing and passing on the systematically documented knowledge among teachers to support lasting improvement, and acquisition of teaching and learning skills in the utilized contexts to minimize the transfer problem. The

collaborative planning and mutual share of annotated instructional products helps better comprehending the rationale, process, and effectiveness, followed by further elaboration and refinement of each feature after implementation. Meanwhile, common assessments need to be incorporated to measure the nature of lesson implementation and student outcomes, which further improve the learning and teaching process (Hiebert & Morris, 2012). This also reflects that sex education can also turn into an accessible platform for teachers to try out those exploratory and innovative style of instructional methods that they dare not experiment with their traditional academic subject classes. In this case, school-based continuous development of sex education is further advocated, whereas teachers are bringing about transformations needed for long-term effects in addition to immediate helps. School teachers should collaborate closely and extensively with external organizations that are highly specialized in sex education, which allows students to expose themselves to useful and up-to-date sex-related information. Meanwhile, teachers need to continue to uphold their professional duties when they are exercising their expertise in selecting suitable learning and teaching materials, making adaptation to the content of the materials, and developing school-based materials about sex education.

Transformation of the Values and Mindsets of Teachers

Influenced by the traditional Chinese culture, a number of conservative Hong Kong teachers still hold a deep-seated belief that they should deliver sex education in a paternalistic and condescending manner under the assumption that students will challenge and embarrass them through imposing critical questions when addressing some highly sensitive and controversial sex-related issues (Mkumbo, 2012). There is a need to get rid of the situation portrayed by P. S. Y. Ho and Tsang (2002), where classroom discourses on sexuality are under vigilant surveillance, even within the context of sex education classes. This reflects the conventional attempt by teachers to impose controls over sexual expressions so that the discussion does not cross the line. Nonetheless, sex education is all about facilitating authentic and interactive dialogues regarding individual wellbeing and interpersonal relationship, and valuing judgment and decision-making inside an environment with mutual trust and respect. Students will become superficial in their learning if they are merely suppressing the complexity and hiding all the limitations in view of their genuine ideas being confronted and challenged by others. Therefore, teachers should avoid their authoritative images and subsequent reinforcement of a restrictive posture when delivering sex education. Instead, they should always express and articulate the ethical and

moral values underlying various sex-related issues, and become aware of their own feelings, attitudes, and concerns toward sex through the series of experiential, interactional, and reflective professional development activities, which can influence their learning and teaching conceptions and approaches (Fok, 2002).

Since frontline teachers are prominent in shaping the classroom culture and student experience throughout sex education, all these trainings are assisting them to better support students to analyze, deconstruct, and reconstruct their thoughts and values, while simultaneously recognizing and respecting those initiated by others (Ferreira & Schulze, 2014). Teachers need to consider their unique personal identities as sexual beings and conceptions of their own roles as sexual educator (L. Wood & Roller, 2014). Meanwhile, they should explore and overcome their own inhibitions and reservations toward sex. By then, teachers can better transform their content knowledge comprehended from the Guidelines and other relational materials into pedagogically powerful and adaptive means, which can remain highly responsive to the diverse student background as reflected by their knowledge of learners and their characteristics. In particular, teachers need to learn how to clarify misunderstandings, facilitate discussion, and formulate explanations through the set of planned actions and strategies. By building on their actual classroom instructions, teachers can undergo continuous evaluation and reflection as retrospective reasoning, which help enhance their self-awareness of the impacts brought by their own teaching, followed by initiating meaningful and effective improvements as prospective new comprehension (Shulman, 1986, 1987). All these are aligned with the overarching therapist and liberationist approaches to learning and teaching as proposed by Fenstermacher et al. (2009), which aim to guide and facilitate students to attain a higher level of self-actualization and free their autonomous minds respectively.

Conclusion

Summary and Contribution of the Research

This article employs the *Guidelines on Sex Education in Schools* as the starting point of investigating how schools in Hong Kong can move toward the delivery of a comprehensive and competent sex education. The ultimate sex education curriculum offered by each school is the outcome of the whole course of ongoing interaction and mutual negotiation throughout the contextualization of the Guidelines. This research can hopefully shed light on many of the idealistic expectations, institutional constraints, and practical concerns when it comes

to approaching Hong Kong sex education. Although the discussion is not exhaustive, the article synthesized most of the controversies emerged from the development of Hong Kong sex education, which can serve as an overall springboard for further discussion. After all, the sex education has emerged as the interplay among the bottom-up, middle-out, and top-down dimensions within a school, which refers to classroom students, frontline teachers, and school curriculum. They should always work hand in hand for initiating any systematic and sustained improvement of sex education in view of their unique school contexts.

Limitations of the Research and Future Directions for Study

This article revealed a wide range of gaps, issues, and challenges, and offered some practical suggestions in approaching sex education. Nonetheless, it is also simultaneously limited in its conceptual and broad nature of analysis as the intention of the research is to offer a systematic and structured review of sex education through reviewing the relevant local and international literatures. In the future, by building upon the preliminary observations and findings in this article, and with the aid of quantitative and qualitative research methods, more empirical studies could be focused on coming up with some evidence-based approaches and strategies which can better enhance the personal development of students through sex education. Moreover, a series of key stakeholders, especially teachers, students, and parents could also be invited to further solicit their perceptions toward Hong Kong sex education. Their viewpoints could better help facilitate the design and implementation of sex education curriculum by aligning their perspectives. Furthermore, given the school-based development of Hong Kong sex education, some schools could be further selected for case studies, which further shed light on the effectiveness and implications of local sex education. Meanwhile, successful examples and models across the world could be compared and contrasted for investigating the possibilities in translating into and adapting in the local context.

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《學校性教育指引》的處境化：邁向全面及有效的香港性教育

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摘要

儘管香港早於 1997 年已推出《學校性教育指引》（下稱《指引》），但過去二十年間，香港學校實施性教育的效果可謂欠佳，甚至停滯不前。雖然政府認為《指引》僅供學校參考，但許多學校在設計各自的性教育課程時非常依賴《指引》。儘管如此，《指引》的處境化揭示了香港以學校為基礎的性教育發展所帶來的對立和挑戰。因此，本研究運用定性文獻分析，對《指引》和香港及世界各地與性教育有關的其他刊物進行批判分析，以期為該領域作出貢獻，然後詳細闡述如何全面實施性教育，以應對數字媒體技術興起、整體和連貫的課程規劃和設計缺乏、家長式和自上而下的學與教方法、跨學科協作不足、課程更新不足或缺乏、教師專業發展不足等挑戰。畢竟，成功實施全面和有效的性教育需要在學校內從下而上、從內到外、自上而下的維度（即學生、教師和課程）進行連貫且具系統的計畫和構建。

關鍵詞：性教育；德育及公民教育；教育政策；課程研究；香港

