

**SEXUALITY EDUCATION AS PANACEA TO PREVENTING SEXUALLY
TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Sexually transmitted infections have been on the increase among young adults. Many of the young adults have been incapacitated one way or the other by such infections. In recent times, many young adults have lost their lives as a result of the devastating effects of sexually transmitted infections. Most of them fall victims due to negligence and majority due to ignorance. Sexuality education, if properly implemented could be a rallying force to reducing the menace of sexually transmitted infections on the teeming population of the young adults. This paper therefore takes a look at sexuality education as a panacea to preventing sexually transmitted infections among young adults in Nigeria. It highlighted the cultural belief of the people on sexual issues, the objectives of sexuality education and the benefits derivable from effective sexuality education. Conclusion was drawn and recommendations were advanced among which is that sexuality education should be inculcated in the school syllabus in the various stages of the Nigeria education system and out-of-school programmes in sexuality education should be designed and thoroughly implemented for the teeming out-of-school teenagers and youths.

Keywords: Sexuality education, panacea, infections, ignorance, sexually transmitted infection.

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Introduction

In the word of Ross (2008), Sexuality Education seeks to reduce the risk of potentially negative outcome from sexual behavior such as unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Ross further noted that sexuality education aim is to enhance the quality of relationships which includes developing the skills in the young adults that will assist them to make informed choices about their behaviours and feel confident and competent about acting on the choices they have made. It is widely accepted that young people have a right to sex education partly because it is a means by which they are assisted to protect themselves against abuse, exploitation, unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

Sexuality education has got varied meanings with different researches. Shine (2004) agreed that young adults and adolescents must acquire proper knowledge for changes that take place in their bodies and minds as they grow into adulthood. The importance of sexuality education cannot be undermined. Collins, Alagiri and Summers (2008) asserted that these young ones are the future leaders of any nation. Living a healthy sexual life is therefore, according to them, very crucial. Therefore, it is important to provide adolescents with appropriate sexuality education especially as it affects their sexual life and health. Eisenberg, Bearinger and Resnick (2008) opined that sexuality education is a major component of comprehensive health education; which help adolescents become healthy adults with responsible health behaviours. Therefore, sexuality education is an important tool that cannot be despised.

Conceptual Perspective

The discussions presented in this paper are guided by the following conceptual perspective:

Foucault (1986) asserts that, individualistic attitude is characterized by the absolute value attitude to individual's singularity and by the degree of independence conceded to him vis-à-vis the group and institution he is answerable to, that is, the way the person behaves will depend largely on what he values the amount of freedom he is allowed and what the society expects of him. The interrelationship of biology, psychology and socio-cultural dimensions determines the total personality of an individual.

Ikpe (2004) postulated that sexuality defines the very essence on one's humanity including one's self-image, being male or female, physical looks and reproductive capacity, that is, sexuality is a natural part of life. It is about the way we are made, how we feel about ourselves, what roles we play in the society and how we operate. Culture as a way of life determines, to a large extent, human behavior. It is patterned, learned, shared and adaptive and is transmittable from one generation to the other (Basso, 1997). Culture has a way of influencing everything we do. It can be perpetuated and has the potential to overpower intervention programmes and educational innovation.

Religious and spiritual beliefs influence feelings about morality, sexual behaviour, pre-marital sexual behaviour, adultery, divorce, contraception, abortion and masturbation (Greenberg, Bruess, and Haffner, 2000). Sexuality education can be seen as yet another religion which is not necessarily different from what already obtains.

Sexuality Education

Sexuality education is the provision of information about bodily development, sex, sexuality, and relationships, along with skills-building to help

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young people communicate about and make informed decisions regarding sex and their sexual health. Sexuality education should occur throughout a student's academic pursuit with information appropriate to student development and cultural background. It should include information about puberty and reproduction, abstinence, contraceptive and condoms, relationships, sexual violence, prevention, body image, gender identity and sexual orientation. It should be taught by trained teachers. Sex education should be informed by evidence of what works best to prevent unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, but it should also respect young people's right to complete and have honest information. Sexuality education should treat sexual development as a normal, natural part of human development (Mckeen, 2006).

Building Evidence and Right-Based Approach to Healthy Decision-Making

Mckeen (2006) asserted that as they grow up, young people face important decisions about relationships, sexuality, and sexual behaviour. The decision they make can impact their health and well-being for the rest of their lives. Young people have the right to lead healthy lives, and society has the responsibility to prepare youths by providing them with comprehensive sexual health education that gives them the tools they need to make healthy decisions. But it is not enough for programmes to include discussions of abstinence and contraceptive to help young people avoid unintended pregnancy or disease. Comprehensive sexuality education must do more. It must provide young people with honest, age-appropriate information and skills necessary to help them take personal responsibility for their health and overall well-being.

Cultural Belief and Issues of Sex in Nigeria

In Nigerian society, the issue of sex still remains secretive to many people. In some cultures, discussions on sex are seen as personal and private. Most parents are not bothered about educating their children on issues relating to sexuality until long after they might have attained maturation age. Some of the parents, while discussing sexual issues with their children would not call the actual names of the sex organ they are talking about. Most Nigerian societies criticize adolescents found discussing issues on sexuality in the open and most times, such adolescents are branded with all sorts of names.

Osasona (2009) stated that it is important for parents to educate their children on sexual issues. Osasona postulated that children between the ages of twelve and thirteen are ripe enough to know the dangers inherent in premarital sex and the disadvantages in having intimate relationship with the opposite sex. It was further stated that this will guide and prevent them from being sexually abused. If they are not pre-informed, it is likely that they learn the wrong way which could be counterproductive. Kirby (2007) stated that abstinence from sexual activities outside marriage is the expected standard for all children and adolescents. Kirby explained further that abstinence from sexual activities is the surest way to avoid out of wedlock pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases and other associated health problems.

Objectives of Sexuality Education

Ross (2008) pointed out that effective sexuality education provides young people with the opportunity to explore the reason why people have sex and rest the emotional feelings of oneself and others. He stated that through sexuality education, young people have the opportunities to explore gender differences and sexuality influences on people's feelings and options. Macnab

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(2004) opined that sexually education aims at developing feelings of self-identity, moral responsibility as an integral part of personality and character development. He said sexuality education develops a healthy and wholesome attitude in human beings including respect for their bodies as an integral part of their personality. He outlined some of the objectives of sexuality education as follows:

- To make affection, sex and love constructive rather than destructive
- To make individuals understand and appreciate sexual aspect of human nature so that psychosexual development may occur as normal and healthy as possible without feeling of indecency, embarrassment or undue guilt.
- To emphasize the cases of premarital chastity as the sexual standard approved by the society because chastity provides a positive goal for teenagers linking human sexual behaviour with love, marriages, parenthood and family life.
- To learn about the dangers of illicit sexual behaviour.
- To appreciate the significance of sexual roles in our society, that is,

male-female sexual roles in the society.

- To learn the key parts and basic concepts of sexually transmitted infections and the roles of teenagers and young adults in the prevention and control of such infections.

Simeon (2009) stated that sexuality education seeks to reduce the dangers involved in premarital sex, provides information and correction of misinformation about sex and make children relate freely with their peers and opposite sex without having bias thoughts,. In this regard, human sexual behaviour is not merely a personal and private matter as sexuality education addresses the positive qualities of relationship and the negative impacts of abuse and exploitative relationship.

Comprehensive sexual health education covers a range of topics throughout the student's academic pursuit. Along with parental and community support, it can help young people to:

- Avoid negative health consequence.
- Communicate and sexuality and sexual health.
- Understand healthy and unhealthy relationships.

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- Understand, value and feel autonomy over their bodies.
- Respect others right to bodily autonomy.
- Show dignity and respect for all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.
- Protect their academic success (Davis 2008, Ybarra and Mitchell 2013, CDC 2010).
- Offer age and cultural appropriate sexual health information in a safe environment for participants.
- Developing cooperation with members of the target community, especially young people.
- Assist youths to clarify their individual, family and community values.
- Assist youths to develop skills in communication, refusal and negotiation.
- Provide medically accurate information about both abstinence and contraception including condom.
- Have clear goals for preventing HIV, other STIs, and or teen pregnancy.
- Focus on specific health behaviours related to the goals, with clear messages about the behaviours.
- Address psychosocial risk and protective factors with activities to change each targeted risk and to promote each protective factor.
- Respect community values and respond to community needs.
- Rely on participatory teaching methods, implemented by trained educators and using all the activities as designed.

Adepoju (2005) implied that the relational for sexuality education includes:

- Taking responsibility for sexual health.
- Building new morality and removing falsity among people.
- Preparing adolescents for adulthood roles.
- Helping adolescents to achieve their full potentials.
- Providing sexual knowledge that can serve as weapon against ignorance.

Characteristics of Effective Sexuality Education

Experts have identified critical characteristic of highly effective sexuality education and sexually transmitted infection prevention education programmes. Kirby (2001), Alford (2008), Society for Adolescent Medicine (2006) have identified such programmes as follows:

Challenges and Prospects of Sexuality Education in Nigeria

Sexuality education like other interventions programmes in Nigeria has suffered many setbacks. Its prospects and challenges are found in various dimensions if sexuality education as highlighted below:

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Society, culture and sexuality: Interactively, complex sets of biological, psychological and socio-cultural issues influence the human sexuality. The way we feel about our worth, the way we think and our body image play important roles in our sexuality (Ikpe, 2004). Most of the time, we judge our looks and behaviours with what our culture dictates.

Religious and sexuality: It has often been said that, behaviour comes out of belief system hence many people have equated sexuality education with some form of religion or gospel that has emanated as a response to adolescents sexual health problems. Religion plays an important role in individual's sexuality as its principle, regulations and practices affect our everyday interactions. Greenbery, Bruess and Haffner (2000) opined that religious and spiritual beliefs influence feelings about morality, sexual behaviour, premarital sexual behaviour, adultery, divorce, conception and abortion.

Social-economic status and sexuality: The problem of low self-esteem and self worthlessness due to poor socio-economic background and lack of sexuality information has been identified by sexuality educators. It is generally believed that, the socio-economic status of individuals greatly influences their sexuality and that, persons of low income status often think and act differently from middle class individuals in matters affecting their sexuality. Low income status people are prone to becoming pregnant and bearing children at an early age. Selingo (1997) argued that sexual experience does not necessarily bring wisdom or skill in sexual decision making. Lack of value clarification restricts our understanding of the many social and cultural factors that influence our sexuality, undermines our understanding of our feelings and jeopardizes our sexuality.

Ethics and sexuality: The ethics of sexuality is about the way we treat ourselves and others in respect to questions such as:

- Should or should I not drink alcohol or smoke cigarette?

- Should I be or should I not be a prostitute?
- Is it right to engage in sexual activity with an underage person or a stranger?
- Is it right to use position or power to obtain sexual favours?

How we respond to ethical questions about our sexual behaviours differentiates what is wrong from what is right and could depend on our type of personality and how skilled we are in handling our emotions and actions. Ethical decision-making underscores the importance of taking responsibility for one's sexual wellbeing (Adepoju, 2005).

Communication and sexuality: Communication can simply be defined as an act of transmitting and receiving messages. One of the most important elements for living in a society is communication or language because it provides the society with a means of socializing its members and a mechanism for role-taking and role-playing. Communication can be verbal or non-verbal, and it involves a lot of negotiations between the sender and the receiver. Our personality traits can easily be determined, most of the time, through the way we communicate (Adepoju, 2005).

Information and sexual wellbeing: One of the major concerns of sexuality education in Nigeria is the sexual health and well-being of its populace, particularly the youths. Ample research findings have revealed that, sexual activities, especially among teenagers are on the increase globally. Emergence of new cultures has led to acculturation and a redefinition of sex among the youths. Sexual matters have become permissive and liberal among members due to exposure to media both foreign and local and the abandonment of important traditional virtues.

Gender and Sexuality: Gender can simply be defined as masculinity or femininity, taking into consideration biological, social and cultural norms. A person's self

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image as a male or female and the roles the person is attached to can be used as gender identity. It is common assumption that society and cultural factors exert more influence on gender identity than to define its roles for males and females and reinforces behaviour through gender roles socialization. The major ways gender affect sexuality includes:

- Pressure to conform to socialization leading to anxiety in men and women;
- Consideration of men as sensitive, gentle and intimate beings is eroded;
- Women are not considered as same sexual beings as men;
- Men and women get locked into specific roles leading to difficulty in division of labour;
- Conflict in interpersonal relationships, emotional needs and expectations.

Media and Sexuality: Ellis (1998) asserts that society depends on permission. Children are persuaded daily by parents to accept certain forms of lifestyles. Advertisements are created by producers to make people spend money, politicians persuade people to vote for them, while individuals persuade each other to remain in friendship, be it conjugal or platonic. According to an estimate by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), more than twenty million people are exposed to their commercials every day. Many writers and speakers discretely or pointedly enter individual's lives through radio, magazines, books, brochures and so on, leaving the individual with many choices about what to do, what to buy and who to be (Adepoju, 2005).

Education, Sexual Knowledge and Sexuality: Education as a liberalizing influence is also an indicator of sexual behaviour. Knowledge, it is generally acknowledged, is a great weapon against ignorance. A sound foundation of sexual knowledge

helps the individual to dispel sexual myths, superstitions and misinformation that hinder proper understanding or create confusion. Accurate information enables the individual to think critically and make sound decisions and also take responsibility for sexual health. In recent times, the idea of how to engage in safer sex depends on how much accurate and up - to-date sexual knowledge we have. The things we need to consider when thinking about safer sex include:

- Types of activities that can lead to the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STI).
- Whether an individual belongs to a higher risk group.
- What can be done to reduce the risk of transmitted STIs?
- Whether the two people involved share the same opinion on STIs.
- Access to factual knowledge as offered by sexuality education enhances our understanding of socio-cultural traditions, rules, norms, inventions and systems that govern our personality (Adepoju, 2005).

Conclusion

Young people have the right to lead healthy lives. As they develop, it is important for them to take more control of their lives so that as they get older, they can make important life decisions on their own. The balance between responsibility and rights is critical because it sets behavioral expectations and builds trust while providing them with the knowledge, ability and comfort to manage their sexual health throughout life in a thoughtful, empowered and responsible way. But responsibility is a two-way thing. Society needs to provide the young adults with honest, age-appropriate information they need to live healthy lives and build healthy relationships. Young adults also need to take personal responsibility for their

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health and well-being. Advocates must work to dismantle barriers to effective sexuality education and lack of access to sexual health information.

Recommendations

To realize the goal and objectives of sexuality education, especially on the young adults, there is the need for the following:

1. The content of sexuality education in Nigeria should be reanalyzed to meet its target.
2. The Nigerian population should be re-sensitized about the need for sexuality education.
3. More capable handlers of sexuality education should be trained.
4. Out-of-School programmes in sexuality education should be designed and thoroughly implemented the teeming out-of-school teenagers and youths.
5. Appropriate and affordable educational resources materials should be designed and provided to meet the needs of providing sexuality related information.
6. There is the need for the current content of sexuality education in Nigeria to be re-conceptualized to pave way for a broader concept to be captured.

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