The Relevance of Sex Education in Improving Children's Understanding of Gender Concepts in Kindergarten

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Abstract:

This study aims to examine the relevance of sex education for early childhood in enhancing kindergarten children's understanding of their gender identity and roles. This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with semi-structured interview techniques with 35 kindergarten teachers from five kindergarten educational institutions in Padang City, Indonesia. Data were analyzed thematically with a focus on teachers' perceptions, attitudes, knowledge, and readiness to implement sex education. The research results show that although some teachers acknowledge the importance of sex education from an early age, they still experience confusion regarding the material that needs to be conveyed, the appropriate teaching methods, and the suitable age limits as well as adequate media for its development. Some other teachers consider this topic inappropriate because it contradicts cultural and religious norms. This study also found a lack of training and educational media to support the implementation of sex education in kindergarten settings. This study is limited to kindergartens in the city of Padang and has not yet involved the perspectives of parents or teachers in rural areas. Further research is recommended to encompass a broader demographic context and collaboration between teachers and parents. The findings of this study highlight the need for teacher training, the development of culturally appropriate learning media, and more open training to change misconceptions about sex education. This study fills a gap in the literature on early childhood sex education in the context of conservative cultures. This research contributes to the understanding of the practical and sociocultural barriers faced by teachers, as well as offering practical strategies for policy development in the curriculum.

1 INTRODUCTION

Sex education is important to provide to children from an early age as one way to impart understanding and raise awareness about sexual issues. Sex education is closely related to reproductive organs and their functions (Nugroho, Rahayu, & Hapsari, 2022). Additionally, sex education aligns with the curriculum-based learning process that involves several aspects, including cognitive, emotional, physical, and social (Gerda, Wahyuningsih, & Dewi, 2022). Sex education can be provided to children gradually, tailored to their level of understanding and age. Children aged 1 to 5 years can already receive sex education (Oktarina & Liyanovitasari, 2019).

Until the end of 2022, there were 797 victims of sexual violence that still occurred (Martin, Riazi, Firoozi, & Nasiri, 2020). In that number, girls are the

most frequent victims of molestation and sexual violence compared to boys. Then, recently, we were shocked by the story of a 12-year-old child who is 8 months pregnant in Langkat Regency, North Sumatra, allegedly a victim of sexual violence by her own older brother. In fact, Law Number 35 of 2014 already includes amendments to Law Number 23 of 2002 concerning child protection, stating that a child is an Indonesian citizen who is not yet 18 (eighteen) years old, including a child still in the womb.

Sexual abuse of children is a serious issue that can harm a child's future both in the short term and the long term. Another consequence of sexual abuse also has a wide-ranging impact on families, communities, and the economy, both in terms of health, rehabilitation, social services, and the costs of the justice system (Alucyana, Raihana, & Utami, 2020). (Alucyana, 2018; Utami, 2021) found in their research

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that 23% of girls aged 7 to 9 years are at risk of becoming victims of rape, and 32% of boys aged 7 to 9 years.

Considering the numerous psychological impacts on children who are victims of rape, early prevention is essential. (Brouskeli & Sapountzis, 2017; Robinson & Davies, 2017)mention that there are six treatment goals for child victims of sexual violence, including teaching them gender appropriateness. (Balter, Van Rhijn, & Davies, 2016) found that early childhood sex education does not teach children to engage in promiscuous sex as adults; sex education aims to help children understand their own bodies and the physical conditions of the opposite sex, as well as to protect children from sexual violence. (Cacciatore et al., 2024) argue that sex education begins with the introduction of body parts. This method can be used with photos, posters, songs, and games.

The introduction of sexuality to children can begin with the introduction of body anatomy, followed by knowledge about reproduction in living beings and how humans and animals reproduce, as stated by (Chomaria & Psi, 2014) sex education starts with the introduction of body parts. Little by little, children learn that the vagina and penis not only function as organs for urination but also as reproductive organs. Parents and teachers can inform children about its impact on them. One way to provide sex education to children is by teaching them to clean their genitals.

(Nakahara et al., 2014) argues for teaching children to use the toilet or clean their genitals by themselves from the age of two, if possible. Teaching children to clean their genitals properly after urinating or defecating will make them independent and not reliant on others. This education also indirectly teaches children not to carelessly let others wash their genitals. In this way, parents or teachers can gradually teach children about sex education.

The way sex education is delivered should not be too vulgar. Because it actually has a negative impact on children. In fact, both girls and boys face the same environmental threats. Research shows that the perpetrators of sexual violence are people close to the child. Therefore, it is important to develop early childhood education materials with a gender perspective. The development of the provided materials is based on the cognitive domain (knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and the affective domain (acceptance). (Nadar, 2017) states that children's sexual development can be seen through the development of gender identity and gender stereotypes. The implications of a child's

understanding of gender include social interactions, biological maturation, behavior, play, and friendships. The gender roles that develop in childhood play a significant role in shaping a person's self-image and influencing how they form relationships later in life. There is a need to integrate gender perspectives into early childhood education, as gender, being an integral part of personality, is also an integral category in early childhood education.

Understanding gender identity becomes one of the roles in child development. Gender plays a major role in setting the agenda for all developmental experiences that affect children. The role of parents and teachers in sex education, especially in providing a correct understanding of the concept of gender identity to children from an early age, is very important. This aims to protect children from the risks of harassment, violence, and sexual deviation. So that children understand the concept and role of gender, so that children know the boundaries in social interactions and know how to protect themselves. However, some parents and some teachers still consider sex education a taboo subject and often avoid it for various reasons, misinterpreting sex education, especially for young children. Therefore, research needs to be conducted to determine the relevance of sex education in enhancing the understanding of gender concepts in children, specifically kindergarten aged children.

2 METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted in the kindergarten of Padang city. The research method used is descriptive qualitative, aimed at describing teachers' perceptions regarding sex education for early childhood, specifically kindergarten children. Data collection related to teachers' views, attitudes, and knowledge about this topic, which are then analyzed to provide an overview of those perceptions. The tool used is interviews based on Khosnawiyah indicators, namely 1) Teachers' perceptions of sex education, 2) Teachers' attitudes towards sex education for early childhood, 3) Teachers' knowledge of sex education for children, 4) Methods and media chosen by teachers in sex education for children, 5) Teachers' courage and readiness to teach sex education.

The following is a table of the interview instrument grid used to collect data in this study

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Table 1: Interview Instrument Framework used in Data Collection.

		T 11	Data Collection
Aspect		Indicator	Purpose
Teachers'	1.	Teachers'	Understanding
perceptions		perceptions of the	how teachers
of sex		implementation	perceive the
education		of sex education	application of sex
		for children	education in
			kindergartens
Teachers'	2.	Perception of the	Assessing
Attitudes		Importance of	teachers' views on
towards Sex		Sex Education	the relevance and
Education		for Early	importance of sex
for Early		Childhood	education for
Childhood			young children.
Children	3.	Factors	Identifying the
		influencing	factors that
		attitudes	influence teachers'
		(culture,religion,	attitudes and
		education) in sex	views on sex
		education for	education for
		adolescents	children.
Teacher's	4.	Understanding	To understand the
Knowledge		the basic	extent to which
about Sex		concepts of sex	teachers
Education		education for	comprehend the
for Early		children	basic concepts of sex education for
Childhood			
	5.	Sources of	early childhood.
	Э.	knowledge	Identifying where
		(training,	teachers get information about
SCIE	VI	literature,	sex education.
		experience)	sex education.
Methods	6.	Methods and	Obtaining
and media of	0.	media used by	information about
instruction		teachers in sex	the methods and
chosen by		education for	media used by
teachers in		children	teachers in sex
sex			education for
education for			children
children			
The	7.	Readiness to	Assessing the
Courage and		teach the topic	readiness and
Readiness of		of sex education	comfort of
Teachers to		in class	teachers in
Teach Sex			teaching sex
Education			education to
			young children
	8.	Obstacles faced	Identifying the
		in teaching sex	obstacles or
		education	challenges faced
			by teachers in
			providing sex
			education

Data was obtained through interviews conducted with kindergarten teachers in the city of Padang.

From all the kindergartens in the city of Padang, after thorough investigation, the exact number was unknown, so 4 kindergartens with a relatively larger number of students and teachers were selected: Negeri Pembina Padang kindergarten with 12 teachers, Telkom Schools kindergarten with 11 teachers, Kartika 1-61 kindergarten with 3 teachers, Labor Pembangunan kindergarten with 4 teachers and Marhamah kindergarten with 5 teachers. The total is 35 teachers. As for the interviews, they were conducted face-to-face between the interviewer and the teachers during break time or after the children went home. The interview is semi-structured, where the researcher uses a prepared list of questions and records the entire process. Teachers were also given the opportunity to further explain their views.

Qualitative data in the form of open interviews were analyzed using data triangulation. The data is first categorized according to the aspects that emerge in the teachers' views on sex education (for example, the obstacles faced, cultural or religious factors that influence, etc.). The results of the interviews are used to provide a more comprehensive picture of the relevance of sex education in enhancing the understanding of gender concepts in early childhood, particularly in kindergarten children.

The data analysis in this study is divided into several components to produce conclusions, as illustrated in the following figure:

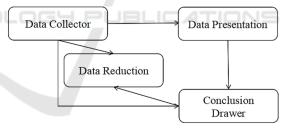


Figure 1: Data Analysis.

3 RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the interviews conducted with teachers at the Kindergarten in Padang city, the results can be seen in the following diagram:

Table 2: Results of the Interview with the Teacher at the Kindergarten in Padang City.

		Result		
Aspect	Indicator	Teacher's Answer	Percen tage	
Sex	Teachers' perceptions of sex education	to be provided to children from an early age according to their developmental stages.	25%	
education in enhancing the understan ding of gender concepts in kinder- garden children	Teacher's Attitude towards Sex Education for Early Childhood	The teacher believes that sex education should be provided as early as possible so that children understand their bodies, know their gender identity, how to take care of their bodies, and understand the boundaries of interacting with people around them, both close ones and others, as well as newly acquainted individuals.	20%	
SCI	Teacher's Knowledge about Sex Education for Early	The teacher understands sex education for children. The teacher is able to teach in a way that is easy for	15%	
	Childhood Methods and media of instruction chosen by teachers in sex education for children	children to understand. Teachers understand and are able to teach sex education using methods, language, and approaches that are easy for children to understand by providing good examples and guidance.	15%	
	The Courage and readiness of teachers to Teach Sex Education	Teachers have the courage and readiness to teach sex education to children and are confident if supported by parents, school principals, and good facilities such as appropriate and relevant learning media.	25%	

Based on the interviews conducted, data was obtained showing that 25% of teachers have taught the topic of sex education. The teachers are active and consistent in teaching sex education to children,

although the learning is not specifically and comprehensively designed but rather included in certain topics such as the theme of oneself. 20% of the respondents indicated that teachers are able to manage the classroom well despite some doubts in sex education. 15% of the teachers have knowledge about sex education for early childhood, which includes an understanding of what should be taught to children at each stage of their development. 15% of the teachers see this topic as an integral part of children's learning and important to teach from an early age. 25% show high courage and readiness of teachers in teaching sex education to early childhood.

One of the teachers stated, "I know it's important to teach children about body parts, but I'm worried that parents might misunderstand and disapprove." Another teacher expressed, "We do discuss this topic, but only briefly, usually when covering themes about the body." There is no special curriculum or supporting media.

There is also a teacher who expressed their limitations, "I want to teach the children about how to take care of themselves, but I am not sure how to convey it in the right words for 4-5 year olds."

Meanwhile, one of the teachers expressed optimism, "If there is appropriate training and learning media, I am ready to teach it." Children are actually quick to respond if it's conveyed through stories or songs.

3.1 Discussion

From the interviews conducted, it was found that almost all of the teachers interviewed had never specifically taught sex education to children. Sex education is provided indirectly, for example, through understanding body parts in the topic of self-identity. Teachers can only take a stance and provide guidance to children by observing the situation or responding to complaints from the children. In sex education, teachers rarely utilize technology media, more often using magazines, children's worksheets (LKA), card media, and some traditional play tools, which are not specifically designated as sexual education media.

Teachers' perceptions regarding sex education for children, some teachers see sex education as an important topic to be taught to young children, especially because appropriate sex education can help children develop a healthy understanding of their bodies, privacy, and healthy social relationships, particularly with friends of the opposite sex. On the other hand, there are also teachers who feel hesitant or uncomfortable teaching sex education to kindergarten children because they perceive that this

topic is more suitable for older ages and that kindergarten children are not yet ready to learn about it, or because they do not have sufficient knowledge to convey this material appropriately. However, some teachers feel ready and have the skills to teach this topic, either due to experience, training, or personal knowledge, but are hindered by the methods and media that are quite difficult for them to obtain because sex education for kindergarten children is somewhat different from older children, considering that children are still in the concrete preoperational stage according to Piaget's cognitive theory. Therefore, the role of selecting appropriate methods and media is very important to pay attention to.

From the number of teachers who have been interviewed, it was also found that many teachers feel unprepared or lack support in terms of teaching materials and training. They feel unsure about the appropriate way to convey this sensitive topic to children, what materials need to be covered, and to what extent they can share with the children so that the children have a basic understanding of sexual knowledge and a correct concept of gender, can behave according to their gender roles, and have knowledge to protect themselves from threats of sexual violence as well as threats of deviant sexual behavior in later ages such as when they become teenagers and when they grow up. From the interview results, it was also found that one of the reasons for the lack of confidence among teachers in teaching sex education to children is that most of them have never received adequate training on sex education for early childhood.

These findings are in line with international research that shows the main obstacles to implementing sex education for young children are the lack of formal training, insufficient curriculum support, and social and cultural pressures. For example, a study by (Brouskeli & Sapountzis, 2017) in Greece found that although most early childhood educators recognized the importance of sex education, they felt they lacked the expertise and feared negative reactions from the community. In Canada, (Balter et al., 2016) also noted that early childhood educators often feel confused about how to integrate sexual and gender aspects into daily learning due to the lack of clear guidelines.

In more open contexts such as the Netherlands and Finland, sex education has been part of the curriculum since early childhood education, with an approach that emphasizes body awareness, respect for privacy, and healthy communication (Cacciatore, Ingman-Friberg, Apter, Sajaniemi, & Kaltiala, 2020). However, countries with conservative cultural

backgrounds, including Indonesia, tend to face resistance because it is considered contrary to religious and social norms.

Therefore, the approach to sex education for young children cannot be uniform. There needs to be local adjustments that consider cultural and religious contexts, while still upholding the principles of children's rights, protection from violence, and childcentered education. This indicates the need for teacher training program designs that are not only technical but also culturally sensitive.

Some teachers feel that sex education for young children should be conducted carefully and with an approach that is appropriate for the child's age and characteristics. They believe that young children need a simple and direct understanding of their bodies, their privacy rights, and how to express discomfort if they encounter an unwanted situation. Sex education for young children should be based on their limited understanding and aligned with their cognitive and emotional development stages. For preschool children, the topic of sex education is more focused on body recognition, privacy, and understanding the differences between genders. For example, at the age of 4-6 years, children can be taught about their body parts with the correct names, why their bodies need to be protected, and why privacy is important.

At an older age (for example, 6-8 years), children can start to be given more information about the relationship between boys and girls, body boundaries, and the consequences of unwanted touching. Using simple and easy-to-understand language is key in teaching sex education to young children. The language used should be free from technical or ambiguous terms that might confuse them. The use of clear and concrete terms about the human body and feelings helps children feel more comfortable with the topic being discussed.

Sex education at an early age should emphasize positive values about the body, respect, and privacy rights. Children need to learn to respect their own bodies and the bodies of others, as well as understand that everyone has the right to privacy and personal decisions. This helps children develop selfconfidence and provides them with tools to protect themselves from potential violence or sexual abuse. Parents and teachers play a very important role in sex education for children. Teachers should collaborate with parents to ensure that the information provided to children is consistent with the values taught at home. Additionally, parents should also feel empowered and educated to continue discussions about sex education at home. Children must feel safe and comfortable when talking about their bodies,

feelings, or unpleasant experiences. Therefore, teachers need to create an open classroom environment where children can ask questions without fear of being punished or judged. A supportive environment will help children feel more confident in expressing themselves honestly.

Basically, sex education for children is a process of providing accurate information about the scope and content of sex education, adjusted to existing themes or new topics that are not far from the teacher's knowledge. The implementation of sex education for children in kindergartens in the city of Padang is influenced by the teachers' perceptions. The understanding and attitude of teachers in implementing sex education for children are built from the teachers' own knowledge and experience.

Sex education is an effort to equip children with accurate knowledge so that they can successfully adjust their sexual attitudes in the future. And the provision of this knowledge causes children to develop the correct logical tendencies regarding sexual and reproductive issues (Yang et al., 2021). Sex education involves guidance, counseling, and knowledge. Guidance and counseling refer to the provision of information regarding practical issues of sexual activity, covering the biological aspects of reproductive function (anatomy and physiology) and appropriate to the level of development and age group. Meanwhile, sex education encompasses aspects of ethics, morality, religion, society, and other knowledge (Herianah et al., 2024).

To protect children from sexual crimes, it is very important to introduce sex education early on (Khosnawiyah, 2019) describes sex education as: Sex education aims to introduce the parts of the body (names and functions), understand the differences between boys and girls, and teach information about sexual behavior (relationships and intimacy) and knowledge about the values and norms in society related to gender.

According to (Ifadah, 2021; Mamuroh, Sukmawati, & Nurhakim, 2022; Masitoh & Hidayat, 2020), sex education for children is not about teaching how to have sexual intercourse, but rather an effort to instill in children an age-appropriate understanding of the function of genitalia and issues related to their natural instincts. Gradually becoming clear. Providing guidance on the importance of maintaining and caring for intimate organs, as well as understanding the risks that may arise related to unhealthy social behaviors and sexual issues. In this way, it is hoped that children can better protect themselves and avoid issues of child sexual abuse.

The teaching of sex education material should be conducted continuously and gradually, tailored to the needs and age of the child, starting from an early age when the child begins to ask about gender differences between themselves and others. (Nawafilaty, 2018; Novia, 2023; Patty, Hukubun, Mahu, Tetelepta, & Linansera, 2022) in this regard remind us that parents themselves know their child's condition, so it is advisable for parents at home to provide sex education first. However, unfortunately in Indonesia, not all parents are willing to openly discuss sexual topics with their children, so the role of the education sector is actually very significant for early childhood to receive education and knowledge that is often considered taboo by parents.

The introduction of sex education concepts to children is prevalent in public institutions, including early childhood education (PAUD). Teachers not only serve as evaluators and facilitators in guiding children but also take on the role of parents for children at school (Hidayati, Widiana, & Handayani, 2022). This means that teachers have the duty to introduce children to the concept of sex education. In this study, the researcher focuses on the relevance of sex education in enhancing children's understanding of gender concepts in Kindergarten.

It is hoped that children can understand sex education from an early age and acquire accurate knowledge about sex through other media, informational media, that can provide sex education to children. The goal of providing sex education to children is to ensure they are protected from the negative risks of sexual behavior and deviations. Children should be given information from an early age about the consequences of engaging in sexual acts without respecting laws, religion, and customs, as well as the potential health impacts that may arise from such deviations (Ünser & Ören, n.d.; Wilkinson, Davies, & Warin, 2024).

Children understand gender identity as an unchangeable characteristic. This understanding begins when a child is 6 months old and starts to differentiate their caregiver's voice from that of their father, mother, or both. Between the ages of 2 and 3 years, children begin to understand the gender identities of boys and girls by using the words father or mother and mom or dad. However, children still need time to understand that gender is a permanent characteristic (Feierabend et al., 2024; Warin, 2019). Then, at the age of 6-7 years, children understand that gender is an unchangeable attribute.

Gender role stereotypes are understandings of the roles played by men and women. Gender role stereotypes are formed when a child develops their gender identity as a girl or boy between the ages of two and a half and three years. Stereotypes are related to the assumption that girls talk a lot, play with dolls, do not like to be hit, and enjoy helping their mothers. Boys are recognized by the fact that they like playing with cars, trying difficult motor skill games, and are more likely to help their fathers. At preschool age and the early years of elementary school, children engage in more activities and outcomes that are suitable for both girls and boys (González-González, Violant-Holz, & del Castillo-Olivares Barberán, 2022; Rae et al., 2019).

4 CONCLUSION

Based on the research and discussion results, it can be concluded that sex education in enhancing the understanding of gender concepts is relevant to be conducted for children in kindergartens in Padang city. This conclusion is based on interviews conducted with 31 teachers from 4 kindergartens. Because the sex education in question is not about teaching sexual activities, but rather about how children understand their gender identity as boys and girls, how to take care of themselves and recognize boundaries and privacy with the opposite sex, understanding how to protect themselves and avoid threats such as sexual violence from close acquaintances or strangers, and how children can be protected from sexual deviant behavior. Here, the role of teachers and parents is very important. When children do not receive that knowledge at home for various reasons, teachers at school must make sex education an important agenda to be taught. Teachers must seek out and possess knowledge about this, then provide instruction to children according to their age characteristics, what needs to be informed to children as basic sex concepts that they must have, what suitable methods and appropriate media to use, creating simple media as tools in teaching so that the information needed by children about sex education can be conveyed as effectively as possible.

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