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Exploring Challenges Faced by Male Science Teachers in Teaching Sexual and Reproductive Health Education in Public Schools in Sri Lanka: With Special Reference to Rathnapura District

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Abstract

Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) education is necessary to improve self-efficacy, decrease false information, increase correct knowledge, and explain and reinforce good values and attitudes. SRH education is the key strategy for promoting safe sexual behavior among adolescents. Nevertheless, the national health survey conducted in 2012/13 showed that only 59% of the youth received SRH education in Sri Lankan schools, yet only less than 1% of adolescents were found to have satisfactory SRH level. The key factors that influence comfort in delivering sexual education are identified as disruptive behavior, insufficient time and lack of dedicated classrooms. Therefore, this study explores the challenges faced by male science teachers in teaching SRH education in public schools in Sri Lanka and provide suggestions to overcome those challenges. This is a phenomenological study that used a sample of 10 male science teachers who teach the ordinary level science subject in public schools in the Ratnapura district. Primary data were collected through face-to-face in-depth interviews with the consent of the participants by using a semi-structured interview guide and done a thematic analysis. The challenges were identified under four major themes: 1) students' curiosity in SRH consisting with sub-themes of age-appropriate knowledge, fear of misinterpretation; 2) lack of teacher training and development for SRH education including sub-themes such as dealing with sensitive topics, continuous professional development; 3) curriculum barriers, comprising sub-themes of insufficient curriculum content, time limitation for teaching SRH, disconnection between biological and social components of SRH, inadequate supporting tools for SRH and 4) parental resistance for teaching SRH education containing sub-themes of educational level of parents, fear of encouraging sexual activity. The study concluded that teaching SRH education in public schools in Sri Lanka poses a variety of challenges for male science teachers and it is required to address those challenges to deliver a comprehensive SRH education for the well-being of the students.

Keywords: Sexual and Reproductive Health Education, Male Science Teachers, Public Schools, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) covers every aspect of individual's physical, mental and social wellbeing with respect for the reproductive system and all of its operations (WHO, 2024). SRH indicates that humans may have fulfilled and safe sexual relationships, reproduce and have the flexibility to choose if, when and how frequently to do (ibid). SRH has been identified and developed as an international human right law and the United Nations confirmed that SRH is a human right established in the core human right conventions (Pizzarossa & Perehudoff, 2017). Good sexual health not only includes the attainment of physical, emotional, mental, and social wellbeing about sexuality, but it also focuses on the absence of disease, dysfunction, or infirmity (WHO, 2017). SRH education includes subject areas such as physical education, puberty, pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections such as HIV/AIDs, as well as feelings and connections that come with having sex and the main goal of the SRH education is to help the adolescents develop the information, self-reliance and abilities to successfully move into adulthood while maintaining good sexual health (ibid).

Though in Sri Lanka there has been an educational program for adolescents on SRH in schools for many years, a sizable proportion of youth demonstrated low access to SRH education and a low level of knowledge on pregnancy, contraception, and socially transmitted infections. Although it is limited, respondents felt that the SRH education received in school is useful for their life (De Silva et al, 2024). One area of national concern has been the lack of knowledge on the requirements of adolescents in Sri Lanka with regard to their sexual and reproductive health (ibid). The national health survey conducted by 2012/13 showed that only 59% of the youth received SRH education in Sri Lankan schools. Also, this survey finds that only less than 1% of adolescents were found to have satisfactory SRH level (Mataraarchchi et al., 2023a). This inadequate SRH education creates negative results within the country. Statistics from the National Child Protection Authority of Sri Lanka indicated that from January to October 2023, there were about 8,000 incidents of child abuse (Fernando, 2023). Also, according to the 2022 statistics of the Police Department of Sri Lanka, 79 child abuse incidents and 1,500 rape cases were reported in the first 9 months of the year, and it was a significant increase from the first 9 months of pervious year (The Morning , 2024). Further, the sources

of Ministry of Health in Sri Lanka stated that, in the 2nd quarter of year 2023, 14,501 cases of sexually transmitted diseases were confirmed (STI National Data, 2023). The World Bank data informed that, the rate of adolescents' fertility has been relatively stable over the last 10 years, with births per thousand adolescents aged 15-19 standing at 19.5% in 2010 and 20.5% in 2020 (Mataraarchchi et al., 2023a).

The key factors influencing comfort in delivering sexual education are identified as disruptive behavior, insufficient time and lack of dedicated classrooms (Rose, 2019). Over emphasis on abstinence, an unconducive learning environment, existence of sexual practices linked to coming of age rites, peer pressure, lack of sexual and reproductive health reinforcement by parents and inadequate training for teachers are also identified as challenges to deliver the Sexual and Reproductive health education (Likupe et al., 2020). Teachers, particularly those who are male, find it difficult to teach the subject of sex education because some parents consider that they are filtering with girls (Espinosa & Barraza, 2021). Challenges identified as being faced by teachers in teaching SRH education include students' ignorance about sex education and reproductive health, parental resistance, cultural and religious taboos and insufficient teacher preparation (Munyai et al., 2023). Besides, teachers feel uncomfortable talking about wet dreams, female genitals and masturbation (Milton, 2003). A Sri Lankan study confirmed that children did not receive an adequate sexual education from the schools (Jayasooriya & Mathangasinghe, 2019). In a recent Sri Lankan survey carried out among unmarried youths concluded that there is a significant knowledge gap on SRH and age-specific and gender-sensitive SRH education is important to address the current gap in SRH knowledge (De Silva et al, 2024). Also, a study conducted among the female science teachers on teaching SRH education revealed that it is needed in public school curriculum as students' knowledge on that is at a lower level, and teachers have noticed that students are attempting to get SRH knowledge through informal sources such as friends and internet which may mislead them (Madhuwanthi & Madhubhasha, 2021). Since both the male and female teachers engage in teaching SRH education in schools in Sri Lanka, exploring about the male teachers' perspective may inform new insights in education context.

Therefore, this research attempts to examine the challenges faced by male science teachers in teaching SRH education in public schools in Sri Lanka, with special reference to Ratnapura district.

Literature Review

Teaching SRH Education

The United Nations Population Fund defines SRH as a condition of total physical, mental, and social wellbeing in all areas pertaining to the reproduce system. According to UNESCO, SRH education is necessary to improve self-efficacy, decrease false information, increase correct knowledge, and explain and reinforce good values and attitudes. Adolescents must have early access to pertinent and high quality SRH education and information in order to be safe and healthy (Ram et al., 2020). School based SRH education play an essential role in the initiation of sex education and has been proven to reduce risky sexual behavior in adolescents.

Efforts to undermine sexuality education are normal but at present the importance of the education system in promoting SRH has been widely acknowledged. SRH education has been a part of the curriculum for the public schools in Sri Lanka since early 1990s, and currently it is taught through two subjects, namely the Science stream and the Health and Physical Education stream. Nevertheless, research has identified a significant lack of knowledge about SRH education as a key contributor to the growing burden of SRH issues within Sri Lanka (UNFPA, 2017). Research shows that a large number of young people in Sri Lanka have little information about SRH, which leads to engaging in problematic sexual conduct and also only 58% students were satisfied with the current system of school-based SRH instruction (Mataraarachchi et al., 2023b). Furthermore, field survey conducted in 2019 among teenagers who had never married, results showed that 10% of males in the 15-19 age group and 7% of those in the 20-24 age group said that SRH was never mentioned in their schools at all (Kumarasinghe & De Silva, 2022).

Challenges faced by teachers in teaching SRH education

Enhancing teacher's interest in teaching SRH education appears to be a challenging task as some teachers are reluctant to discuss SRH with students

in the classroom mainly due to the sensitivity of the topic. Teachers' fear in teaching SRH education, thinking it may boost children's "sexual awakening" and could lead to them engaging in sexual conduct (Shibuya et al., 2023; Donovan, 1998). However, teachers also experience personal discomfort with certain subjects. For instance, some teachers may be afraid to teach puberty in classroom (Bunoti et al., 2021).

Another major obstacle is teachers' reluctance to teach SRH due to lack of training in teaching SRH (Donovan, 1998). Teachers may feel uneasy when unexpected questions arise since they are not prepared to answer them. Some teachers are not confident enough to deliver SHR education without having formal training on it (Wakjira & Habedi, 2024). The teaching capacity of teachers may be affected by their experiences of teaching SRH and their gender (Lama, 2022).

SRH education was seen as opposition to religious and cultural norms, as it confronts local ideas of sexual morality. Particularly, in the Asian cultural norms, that oppose teaching SRH education to students, believing it is contrary to their culture or religion (Latifnejad et al., 2013). There were concerns that some topics were too sensitive as they were believed to promote pre-marital and casual sex among learners (Zulu et al., 2019). Because of this, teachers feel uneasy teaching SRH and worry about possible resistance from parents, who also have cultural backgrounds that discourage teaching SRH to their children (Mahoso et al., 2023).

Also, issues associated with SRH curriculum are obstructing the smooth delivery of SRH education such as inadequate coverage of topics, effectiveness of SRH teaching approaches, lack of comprehensive teaching materials to help teachers adapt the curriculum to specific setting (De Silva et al., 2024; Wakjira & Habedi, 2024). This is extremely problematic as teachers' skills to effectively implement sex education curriculum are influenced by their own views, values and attitudes (Ocran, 2021). It's believed that existing school SRH education curriculum's structure and design are uneven and inadequate at supporting adolescents' sexual health. Comprehensive information about SRH, including relationships, social concerns, sexual behavior and life skills is lacking (Acharya et al., 2019).

Apart from that, parental resistance might compromise teachers' loyalty to the SRH education curriculum because they could skip certain important topics in

order to avoid parental criticisms (Zulu et al., 2019). Less educated rural people are more likely to reject sexuality education, believing those conflict with their cultural beliefs and practices (Adekola & Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2021). Uncooperative parents prevented their children from asking questions and they disapproved of any SRH related school programs (Lama, 2022). It was found that female science teachers in Sri Lanka were willing to teach SRH education in public schools, yet traditional SRH curriculum content, inappropriate pedagogy, lack of training and resources, and difficulties in dealing with sensitive topics were refraining them from doing it (Madhuwanthi & Madubhasha, 2021). Though many challenges are posing in teaching SRH education in schools, it is pivotal to provide that education for the adolescents.

Methodology

This is a qualitative study which adopted phenomenological research design. The study focused on male science teachers in public schools in Rathnapura district. A total of 10 male science teachers were interviewed covering girls only, boys only and mixed public schools, reaching a level of saturation (table 1). The sample was purposively selected to ensure inclusion of participants with diverse views and experiences about SRH education. Primary data were collected from the participants through face-to-face in-depth interviews with the consent of the participants by using a semi-structured interview guide. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

To explore challenges encountered by male science teachers in teaching SRH education in public schools, data were collected through 10 participants whose age ranging from 32 to 58 years. The majority of them are married and have studied in mixed schools. They have been teaching science for a quite considerable period in public schools in Sri Lanka.

Table 1
Sample Profile

Participants	Age of teacher (in years)	Marital status of teacher	Living area of teacher	School of teacher	Currently teaching school	Service period (in years)
Participant 1	59	Married	Urban	Mixed	Girls	37
Participant 2	45	Married	Urban	Mixed	Girls	11
Participant 3	32	Unmarried	Rural	Mixed	Girls	7
Participant 4	38	Married	Semi Urban	Mixed	Boys	12
Participant 5	32	Unmarried	Semi Urban	Single Gender	Girls	5
Participant 6	38	Married	Semi Urban	Mixed	Girls	11
Participant 7	45	Married	Urban	Mixed	Girls	13
Participant 8	54	Married	Semi Urban	Mixed	Mixed	25
Participant 9	34	Unmarried	Rural	Single Gender	Boys	9
Participant 10	44	Married	Urban	Mixed	Mixed	14

Source: *Field data, 2024*

The participants described a variety of challenges they are encountering when teaching SRH education in public school. Based on their explanation researchers identified main themes and sub-themes as appeared in the table 2.

Students' Curiosity in SRH

According to the male science teachers, students are very curious about SRH knowledge and related matters. Their curiosity begins at the age of 11 or 12 and they start to learn, discuss, inquire and experience it. However, students often quench that curiosity through friends, peers, internet and their own efforts. While curiosity is a natural part of the adolescent development, seeking information from unreliable and inappropriate sources may lead to misconceptions and misunderstanding.

"If the schools can minimize this curiosity at the early ages of students, we can minimize the SRH related issues prevailing in the society" (Participant 5)

In such circumstances providing them accurate information and SRH knowledge is challenging for teachers in two ways; teaching the students age-appropriate SRH knowledge and addressing male science teachers' fear of students misinterpreting SRH knowledge/concepts.

Age-appropriate knowledge

Male science teachers acknowledged the gap between the age at which students' curiosity arises and the delivery of formal SRH education in public schools. The public schools enter into SRH topics in grade 10 whereas many adolescents have already formed opinions about sex, reproduction and relationships by that time. The opinions of the students are presumed to be either accurate or inaccurate. Some students ask the teachers to teach certain topics in advance to ensure their opinions about SRH knowledge. Consequently, it may complicate the delivery of SRH education for the students.

"Many students have curiosity about SRH before they learn this subject in grade 10. Mostly they go to experience things because of this curiosity" (Participant 6)

Fear of misinterpretation

Fear of misinterpreting SRH concepts is a common concern among male science teachers, as it may impart inaccurate knowledge and false information to the students, potentially damaging the student-teacher relationship and engagement. Usually, the conversations about SRH are less common and discouraged in Sri Lankan context through cultural lens of privacy and traditional values. There may be a higher chance of misunderstanding and misinterpretation of SRH related matters, which is a problematic.

Teachers' training and development for SRH education

The primary goal of SRH education is to equip students with the knowledge and skills to make responsible choices about their SRH. Provisioning of such a comprehensive education should be a methodical effort. Teaching a subject like SRH which includes sensitive topics is even more essential but complex.

The male science teachers in the study described their displeasure and lack of confidence in teaching SRH education in the absence of proper training and development for teachers. Accordingly, science teachers compromise the contents or topics of the subject to be taught, level of knowledge to be imparted, and instructional strategies to be adopted, leading to demeaning the quality of the subject. The challenge of lack of training and development has been narrowed down into two sub-themes as dealing with sensitive topics in the subject and provisioning of continuous professional development for teaching the subject.

Dealing with sensitive topics

In the absence of training, the teachers mostly rely on the curriculum for directions. The syllabus offers an organized overview of the topics that should be taught in the classroom, but it frequently lacks depth, particularly when it comes to difficult and dynamics subjects like SRH. Teachers have a certain amount of comfort and maturity when it comes to discussing sensitive subjects in SRH, such as consent, sexual activity, puberty, contraception and etc. without sufficient preparation, teachers face challenges to have a direct discussion about these subjects, which may lead them to ignore or treat them insufficiently.

“I have not undergone any training in teaching SRH. We only have a given syllabus” (Participant 2)

Continuous professional development

According to teachers, they usually didn’t receive any professional support relate to the SRH education and willing to have a professional growth, especially in sectors like SRH where social and medical research is always changing, and knowledge is expanding quickly. Teachers must be knowledgeable in the most recent knowledge about gender identity, consent, STIs, contraception, and other crucial SRH topics. And also, they require the instructions on how to navigate these subjects’ sensitivity in a classroom context.

“There is not any training program or workshop conducted by the ministry of education regarding SRH education recently. What I teach is the classroom that I have learnt during my Advance Level class as a student” (Participant 4)

Curriculum Barriers

The theme curriculum barriers include content-related, curriculum-wide procedural, structural and delivery-related obstacles that obstruct the effective delivery of SRH education. Having curricular and instructional alignment between grade levels is necessary to support student achievement and to meet learning objectives. However, male science teachers have mentioned that curriculum barriers pose a lot of disadvantages for both the students and teachers. They have revealed them through four sub-themes as insufficient curriculum content, time limitation for teaching SRH education, disconnection between biological and social components of SRH, and inadequate supporting tools for teaching of SRH education.

Insufficient curriculum content

As per the teachers, prevailing science curriculum content of public schools is insufficient to cover SRH areas, and SRH contents are dispersed in the science subject. Due to the limited scope of SRH education, teachers have to regularly fill in knowledge gaps, which makes it challenging to provide students with a comprehensive education on SRH.

Teachers described that the curriculum ignores the larger emotional, social and psychological aspects of SRH instead of that mechanics of reproduction. This overemphasis on biology leads to an imbalanced learning experience.

“Only the Reproductive system, process and few diseases are only talking within the curriculum. But there is another huge area that needs to be covered to create a full aware student” (Participant 3)

Time Limitation for teaching SRH education

Public school science stream curriculum currently covers three subjects: biology, chemistry and physics, with SRH education included in the biology syllabus. The time allocated for science classes is not enough to fully cover the syllabus of those three subjects. Hence, it does not allow to teach SRH education effectively, by productively engaging in discussions with the students and answering their questions. Teachers may therefore rush through the SRH given topics, which would hinder students’ comprehension and interest in the SRH area.

"Time limitation for SRH education would not let us to teach comprehensive SRH education. We need to cover the whole syllabus within limited time period and prepare students to sit the examination" (Participant 10)

Disconnection between biological and social components of SRH

According to the teachers, the disconnection between the biological and social components of SRH education is a critical challenge. In the absence of adequate instructions and curricular support, teachers are quite confused how to address the broader social contexts of SRH. Biological information of SRH is real, objective, and uncontroversial, making it simpler to teach. However, social dimensions of SRH like gender roles, gender norms, social structures, social expectations, consent and emotional bonds require a distinct set of educational methods and sensitivities. Due to the narrow teaching focus, mostly on biological aspects of SRH as specified in the curriculum, the social aspects of SRH education are degraded, which is fundamental for the well-being of adolescents. Thus, the male science teachers find it challenging to impart knowledge on relationships and the emotional aspects of SRH education.

"The syllabus highly includes biological concepts and themes of SRH. So, our main focus is covering biological aspects of SRH and merely touching the areas of social and emotional aspects of SRH." (Participant 5)

Supporting tools for teaching SRH education

Modern educational environment relies more on digital tools and resources to enhance learning whereas contemporary adolescents are technology-savvy. Male science teachers have identified this premise as a favourable condition for delivering SRH education for students in effective manner. As described by the male science teachers, SRH education often deals with complex biological processes that are sometimes difficult for students to grasp through verbal explanations alone, it would be easier to understand them using supporting tools such as photos, diagrams, videos etc. Digital and visual aids can assist mitigate the discomfort by focusing the discussion on factual, scientific representations, rather than subjective or culturally influenced views. However, the challenge encountered by the male science teachers is the absence of digital materials and visual aids created especially for SRH education in the public schools in Sri Lanka. This includes not having access

to tools that may make learning more engaging and dynamic, such as computers, television, multi-media projectors, podcasts, and instructional software.

“We don’t have diagrams, authorized videos to enhance the understanding of the content which can’t explain verbally” (Participant 4)

Parental resistance for teaching SRH education

Interviews with the male science teachers exposed that parents’ resistance has become a challenge for male science teachers to transmit SRH knowledge for students in public schools. According to the teachers, parents’ unawareness about SRH education, cultural norms and religious beliefs largely contribute to negative attitudes towards SRH education. It may be due to the level of education among the parents, and also, they might think that SRH education leads to promote sexual engagement among the students.

Educational level of parents

The male science teachers revealed that parents with a better educational level have a more favorable perception of teaching SRH education in public schools. These parents seemed to have a greater awareness of the value of this kind of knowledge in fostering responsible sexual conduct, reducing sexually transmitted infections, and improving adolescent health. Due to a lack of knowledge or misunderstanding about the SRH education, uneducated and/or less educated parents have considered it a violation of a taboo. These parents may place a high priority in upholding traditional values since they frequently feel that SRH topics introduced in schools are inappropriate. Due to societal expectation and family customs, a highly educated parent from a conservative cultural background could however be resistant to SRH education.

“It appeared that educational level of parents greatly effects on the resistance towards the SRH education. Apart from that cultural believes and the family opinions may affect the parental resistance.” (Participant 6)

Fear of encouraging sexual activity

Another common misconception held by parents about SRH education is that the subject may promote sexual activities among the adolescents. This could be a serious consideration to many parents to resist the subject. They believe

that SRH education encourages sexual experimentation and/or teaching the students how to have sex. Parents who have this idea might believe that keeping their children in silence or avoiding them accessing SRH knowledge will keep them safer.

"Some parents are afraid that SRH education taught in schools promotes sexual activities and experiments, while parents are trying to hide such sensitive topics from their children". (Participant 2)

The key challenges faced by male science teachers in teaching the SRH education are succinctly articulated in table 2 with the main themes and sub-themes.

Table 2

The main and sub-themes emerged from data analysis

Themes	Sub Themes
Students' Curiosity in SRH	- Age-appropriate knowledge - Fear of misinterpretation
Teacher training & development	- Dealing with sensitive topics - Continuous professional development
Curriculum Barriers	- Insufficient curriculum content - Time limitation for teaching SRH - Disconnection between biological and Social components of SRH - Inadequate supporting tools for SRH
Parental Resistance	- Educational level of parents - Fear of encouraging sexual activity

Source: *Field data, 2024*

Discussion

Exploring of the challenges faced by male science teachers in teaching SRH education in public sector schools in Sri Lanka identified four key thematic areas: students' curiosity in SRH, lack of teacher training and development for SRH education, curriculum barriers, and parental resistance fir teaching SRH. Students' curiosity about the SRH matters has been further affirmed by students explaining that sexuality education needs to begin before the puberty since young people are more curious about sex and sex-related information

due to the effects of globalization and internet access (Pokharel et al. 2006). Puberty is a time of peak curiosity and sexual intention. It is also a time when misconceptions about the reproductive process and its effects to become apparent, leading to a permissive attitude toward sexual conduct (Pradnyani et al., 2019). Also, findings emphasize the challenge of lack of training and development in teaching SRH education. Compatible with that finding, some studies have stated the necessity of special training for SRH education (Wakjira & Habedi, 2024). It has been shown that teachers frequently lack the necessary training to effectively teach the subject and find it awkward to bring up sexuality related topics (Ngissa et al., 2024). Without proper training, teachers will compromise the contents of teaching in an arbitrary manner, deciding how, when and what to teach to students (Zulu et. al., 2019). It is noted that the responsibility of sexuality education is undertaken with neither in-depth knowledge of the subject matter nor adequate instruction in how to deliver SRH education (Donovon, 1998).

Also, curriculum barrier is another significant challenge to provide comprehensive SRH education to students. This finding has been supported by studies, arguing that most traditional curricula focus on abstinence-based approaches and biological aspects of reproduction, which do not provide students with the necessary social, emotional, and psychological skills to manage SRH responsibly (Goldman, 2010).

The challenge of parental resistance for teaching SRH education in schools has been found in research, with parents believing that education could prompt an earlier start to sexual activity and being concerned about discussions related to diverse gender and sexual identities (Obach, 2022). Nevertheless, some parents do support teaching SRH education at the schools, whereas they are not in a position to discuss such matters at home (Ram et al. 2020).

Conclusion

This phenomenological study intends to explore the challenges encountered by male science teachers in teaching SRH education in public schools in Sri Lanka and it collected primary data from the male science teachers in Rathnapura district. The data revealed that male science teachers face a variety of challenges from the students, from the parents, through the curriculum and the absence of proper training and development for teaching SRH education.

Knowing the benefits of teaching SRH education for the adolescents, it is suggested for policymakers to incorporate comprehensive SRH education within the public-school curriculum and work on capacity building of teachers through training. Also, by getting the parents' engagement, and the use of culturally sensitive teaching methods, teachers can overcome these challenges and contribute to a more informed healthy society.

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