

Under the covers: The politics and discourse surrounding sex education in Japan

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Abstract: *With the overturning of Roe v. Wade, discussions regarding the policing of women's bodies and reproductive rights have occurred worldwide. Japan is no exception with its recent talks to require spousal consent for the use of abortion pills. With greater restrictions on reproductive rights comes the need for more comprehensive education on consent, contraception, and safe sex practices to prevent unintended pregnancies. However, in contrast to UNESCO's comprehensive sex education which covers how the body develops, relationships and rights, sexual diversity and gender equality, even in Japan's newly revised "Life Safety Education" curriculum, references to sexual intercourse remain off limits. In this context the role of parents, NPOs, and credible online resources has become critical. Moreover, while national guidelines are generally fixed, changes can be made at the prefectural level with parental consent. One of the prefectures which managed to do so was Tokyo. This paper thus focuses on Tokyo's sex education guidelines and compares and contrasts it with both UNESCO's eight key concepts and the nation-wide curriculum. By means of content and discourse analysis, I reveal the bias in what is being taught, and the ideological underpinnings which perpetuate the policing of bodies through curriculum design.*

Keywords: *policy, sex education, Japan, SDGs.*

Introduction

Although approaches to sex education vary from country to country, and values range from liberal to conservative, the contents of sex education curricula are subject to much contention. Some of the key factors include what children learn, when they learn it, whom they learn from, and who is responsible for the policies and curriculum. Taking into consideration sustainable development goals (SDGs) and global issues related to gender, health, and education, UNESCO created the “International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education.” The guidance covers a diverse range of key concepts such as: relationships; values, rights, culture and sexuality; understanding gender; violence and staying safe; skills for health and well-being; the human body and development; sexuality and sexual behavior; and sexual and reproductive health (UNESCO, 2018). While at a glance these concepts seem comprehensive and applicable to many cultural contexts, apparently only a “handful of countries are teaching it” and like Japan, “many governments do not provide key information such as how to use condoms and where to get them” (Kawano, 2021). Some critics have argued that the reason for this is because Japan “sees sex education largely as a target for its pro-natalist and pro-family policies underpinned by moral codes developed in the past” (Huiyan, 2011). In any case, ideology and politics aside, the dangers or consequences of neglecting to adequately educate students about conception, contraception and safe sex practices can result in unintended teen pregnancies and the contraction of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). In fact, according to data collected from Japan’s National Institute of Infectious Diseases, although the number of people infected with STIs in Japan has remained unchanged since 2000, the number of people infected with syphilis has increased sharply (MLHW, 2020). To mitigate this situation, and as evidenced in research, “sexual education that includes instruction on preconception care can help raise students’ awareness, helping avoid unexpected pregnancies, and could possibly contribute to better reproductive health for both men and women” (Tateoka & Itani, 2022). Taking this into consideration, this study aims to ascertain the scope and trends of the recently revised sexual education curriculum in Japan (in particular, Tokyo’s). By employing text mining tools and methods of content and discourse analysis, I reveal the extent to which Tokyo’s curriculum measures up to UNESCO’s standards, as well as Japan’s Ministry of Education’s (MEXT) overall values and attitudes towards sex education in Japan. The findings of this study might shed light on the discrepancy between the students’ needs and how MEXT continues to push its pro-natalist ideology and keep critical information under the covers and its young citizens in the dark. To conclude, I argue that despite the ministry’s curriculum mandates, alternative means of education can be sought and provided by NPOs and reputable Vloggers.

Literature Review

In order to understand the socio-historical factors that have influenced attitudes towards sex and sex education, it is critical to provide a brief overview of the implementation of sex education in Japan and the cultural values and attitudes towards sex and sexuality in Japan. Those already familiar with Japanese literature and history will know that conservative attitudes and sheltering children from knowledge about sex and sexuality is relatively new in Japan. For instance, during Tokugawa’s reign (1603-1868) even sex between males was “not only widely tolerated but positively celebrated in popular art and literature” (Leupp, 1995, p.1). In addition, the surge in popularity of kabuki theater during the Tokugawa period and increased demand for *shunga* (a popular form of erotic woodblock prints) perhaps highlight the acceptability of unabashed erotic expression and consumption at that time. When Commodore Perry and his crew arrived in 1853, they were appalled by what they saw in the streets of Japan and the fact

that no one showed any shame for how openly sexual they were (Turk, 1966, p.109). This pivotal interaction with “the West,” eventually led to the opening of Japan’s borders and the formation of the Meiji government. Sabine Frühstück notes that the “formation of the Japanese nation-state in the 1870s brought about new concepts of the populace as a social organism to be protected, nurtured, and improved by a public health system” and by the late 1880s, “the state had developed powerful instruments with which to investigate, manage, and control the health (more precisely, the sexual health) of the populace in order to build a modern health regime” (2003, p.6). This emphasis on protecting and policing bodies spurred the publication of articles on sex education in newspapers, magazines, and medical journals. With this, new theories of child development triggered discussions about the need to instructing children and teens on their sexuality as well as the “obligation to help parents, teachers, and other social actors guide children’s sexual development and maturation” (Frühstück, 2003, pp.7-8). Frühstück adds that nervous exhaustion and masturbation were attributed to misdirected sexual desire in children and due to that “the sex education of children moved to center stage in the discourse on the improvement of the national body, a discourse that continued through the twentieth century” (p.8).

Although there were talks of introducing sex education as a subject in 1908, it was not formally introduced until 1992 when there were public demands for education reforms, a rise in sexual activity among teens (as well as HIV cases), debates over teen pregnancy, and yet the country’s declining fertility rate (Kawahara, 1996, pp.33-42). Content-wise, Huiyan suggests that the official guidelines, which led to the first introduction of sex education curricula in 1992 predominantly featured reproductive and prophylactic functions of sex based on “traditionally derived family values [...] the responsibility to produce offspring and to ensure generational continuity, the normalcy of marital heterosexuality and the gendered construction of sexual drive” (2011, p.906). Since the implementation of sex education in Japan, it has never been a subject in and of itself. Rather, it has been covered very briefly in health, ethics classes or under the guise of “Life Safety Education.” To complicate things further, in 1998, MEXT introduced the *hadome kitei* (trans. “off limits” rule). Essentially, this rule, which has continued to this day, mandates that any talk of the process leading up to pregnancy should be avoided in both elementary school and junior high school (Tani, 2021). The problem with this, as authority on sex education in Japan Hashimoto Noriko argues, is that while children who receive sex education learn how to control their bodies, if proper knowledge is not provided, they are “defenseless” and this hinders both individual development and happiness (Kuwahara, 2019). In addition, since the biological, scientific facts of sex and the concept of gender equality are missing in Japan’s sex education, Hashimoto adds that it goes against UNESCO’s standards and if this trend continues “Japan is going to find itself isolated within the international community” (Kuwahara, 2019). Sex educator June Low also acknowledges that Japan’s sex education is incredibly basic, does not teach anything about sexual pleasure, and lessons on consent are missing (Kawano, 2021). She also notes that there is “a big rape culture here, as well. An extremely sexist society, that’s not being discussed.” (Kawano, 2021). By excluding these topics in the curriculum, it could be argued that sex education in Japan is inadvertently encouraging date rape and teen pregnancy in a desperate effort to boost its fertility rate. Fortunately, the national curriculum was revised in 2021 to include issues such as sexual harassment, coercion, assault, and the dangers of online hook-ups (MHLW, 2022). However, the emphasis seems to be on self-protection rather than addressing the problem of sexual predators in the first place. Furthermore, the aforementioned “off limits” rule is still in place. Due to these circumstances, individual schools and local education boards through to NPOs, parents, and YouTubers have

been left to fill in the gaps. As the nation’s capital and most populous city, Tokyo has taken the initiative to implement its own curriculum based on the national guidelines. The question is, to what extent does it cover UNESCO’s eight key concepts while trying to adhere to the national curriculum?

Methodology

In order to answer the aforementioned question, this research involved an analysis of Tokyo Metropolitan Board of Education’s (TMBoE) sex education guidelines (2019). By means of content and discourse analysis, the general lesson contents as well as the overall aims were examined. While Tokyo’s sex education guidelines include curricula for elementary school through to high school, this research focuses on the age groups in which sex education is more critical (namely, in junior school and high school and in the age range of 12 to 18 inclusive). These curriculum outlines were then compared and contrasted with both UNESCO’s eight key concepts and MEXT’s national Life Safety Education curriculum (2022). As noted, the aim is to determine how TMBoE negotiates national mandates with UNESCO’s standards, and of course, sustainable development goals pertaining to gender, human rights, and education. The table below outlines the categories of the key concepts or learning areas of each guideline.

Table 1. Sex education key concepts (Source: Author)

| Education body | Concept/ Area 1 | Concept Area 2 | Concept/ Area 3 | Concept/ Area 4 | Concept/ Area 5 | Concept/ Area 6 | Concept/ Area 7 | Concept/ Area 8 |
|----------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| UNESCO | Relationships | Values, rights, culture and sexuality | Understanding gender | Violence and staying safe | Skills for health and well-being | The human body and development | Sexuality and sexual behavior | Sexual and reproductive health |
| MoE | Respect for oneself and others | The dangers of social media | Sexual assault/ violence | Dating violence/ violence | Sexual harassment | JK business/ compensation dating | | |
| TMBoE | Respect for life | Biology | Psychology | Society | | | | |

Aside from examining the class contents, the aims were also analyzed as they also provide insight into the ideological underpinnings, or the agenda, if you will, of each curriculum. In order to gain deeper insight into the texts and content, the text mining tool *User Local* was utilized to analyze word frequency, cooccurrence patterns, and generate word clouds of the curricula. Since the author was the sole researcher and interpreter of the data, the objectivity of the findings and discussions are questionable. Nevertheless, the author acknowledges that this factor is one of the study’s flaws. The findings of the study will henceforth be outlined in the following section.

The Content Analysis: Findings and Discussion

Although the aims, methods of instruction, instructors, and learning objectives all play significant roles in the curriculum design, it is the content itself which conveys the most critical information to the students. While the emphasis is on TMBoE’s curriculum, the content of

UNESCO's and the MEXT's curricula will also be discussed.

Class Contents

As a means of comparison, it is worthwhile to first consider UNESCO's international standards. It is important to note that UNESCO's curriculum approach is based on "comprehensive sexuality education" (CSE). It has been defined as:

a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives. (UNESCO, 2018, p16)

Evidently, physical and mental well-being is taken into account, as well as human rights. For a basic overview of the key concepts and topics, please refer to Figure 1 below.

| | | |
|--|--|--|
| <p>Key concept 1: Relationships</p> <p>Topics:</p> <p>1.1 Families 1.2 Friendship, Love and Romantic Relationships 1.3 Tolerance, Inclusion and Respect 1.4 Long-term Commitments and Parenting</p> | <p>Key concept 2: Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality</p> <p>Topics:</p> <p>2.1 Values and Sexuality 2.2 Human Rights and Sexuality 2.3 Culture, Society and Sexuality</p> | <p>Key concept 3: Understanding Gender</p> <p>Topics:</p> <p>3.1 The Social Construction of Gender and Gender Norms 3.2 Gender Equality, Stereotypes and Bias 3.3 Gender-based Violence</p> |
| <p>Key concept 4: Violence and Staying Safe</p> <p>Topics:</p> <p>4.1 Violence 4.2 Consent, Privacy and Bodily Integrity 4.3 Safe use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)</p> | <p>Key concept 5: Skills for Health and Well-being</p> <p>Topics:</p> <p>5.1 Norms and Peer Influence on Sexual Behaviour 5.2 Decision-making 5.3 Communication, Refusal and Negotiation Skills 5.4 Media Literacy and Sexuality 5.5 Finding Help and Support</p> | <p>Key concept 6: The Human Body and Development</p> <p>Topics:</p> <p>6.1 Sexual and Reproductive Anatomy and Physiology 6.2 Reproduction 6.3 Puberty 6.4 Body Image</p> |
| <p>Key concept 7: Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour</p> <p>Topics:</p> <p>7.1 Sex, Sexuality and the Sexual Life Cycle 7.2 Sexual Behaviour and Sexual Response</p> | <p>Key concept 8: Sexual and Reproductive Health</p> <p>Topics:</p> <p>8.1 Pregnancy and Pregnancy Prevention 8.2 HIV and AIDS Stigma, Care, Treatment and Support 8.3 Understanding, Recognizing and Reducing the Risk of STIs, including HIV</p> | |

Figure 1. UNESCO's CSE Key Concepts (Source: UNESCO, 2018, p. 36)

In contrast, MEXT's basic outline for the junior high school (JHS) and high school (HS) curricula illustrated in the table below lacks specific details. For this reason, the curricula were analyzed and coded to determine the sub-topics (summarized in Table 3).

Table 2. MEXT’s “Life Education Curriculum” (Source: MEXT, 2021, p.2)

| Content | JHS 1 st year | JHS 2 nd year | JHS 3 rd year | HS 1 st year | HS 2 nd year | HS 3 rd year |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Respect for oneself and others | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| The dangers of social media | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Sexual assault/violence | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Dating violence/intimate partner violence | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| JK business (compensation dating) | | | | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| Sexual harassment | | | | ○ | ○ | ○ |

Table 3. MEXT’s “Life Education Curriculum” Sub-topics (Source: Author)

| Respect for oneself and others | The dangers of social media | Sexual assault/violence (SV) | Dating Intimate violence | violence/ partner | JK business /compensation dating | Sexual harassment (SH) |
|---|--|---|--|-------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Respecting and protecting one’s personal space | The risks of online hook-ups | Defining SV | Defining domestic violence | | The dangers of online hook-ups | Definitions (verbal, non-verbal) |
| Good relationship building skills | The risks of sending/ receiving sexually explicit images | Types of SV (non-physical, physical) | Defining dating violence | | | Examples of SH |
| Learning to say ‘no’ and boundary creation skills | How/where to get help | Why it occurs (imbalance of power, unequal relationships, hierarchical relationships) | Types of dating violence (sexual, economic, physical, psychological) | | | Gender identity and SH |
| | | Prevention (respect for oneself and others, building good relationships) | Recognizing coercive control | | | Sexual identity and SH |
| | | Prevention of secondary damage (such as the effects of rumors, gossiping, etc) | Learning to say ‘no’ and boundary creation skills | | | Recognizing SH |
| | | Physical and psychological effects of SV (self-blame, suicidal thoughts, trauma, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, sleep disorders, etc) | | | | |
| | | Stop victim blaming, stress assailant accountability, zero tolerance | | | | |
| | | How to protect yourself (before, during, and after an incident) | | | | |
| | | How/where to get help | | | | |

In a similar vein, TMBøE’s areas of study (see Table 1) are limited to “Respect for life,”

“Biology,” “Psychology,” and “Society”, thus the specific details of the lesson contents were determined through analysis and coded (summarized in Table 4 below).

Table 4. TMBoE’s Sex Education Curriculum Sub-topics (Source: Author)

| Biology | Psychology | Society | Respect for life |
|--|--|--|--|
| Puberty and development (body, mind, and behavior) | Adolescent maturation, independence, and personal growth | Adolescent maturation, independence, and personal growth | Contemporary issues and ethics |
| Conception, pregnancy, and childbirth (health issues for the mother and child) | Conception, pregnancy, and childbirth (health issues for the mother and child) | Conception, pregnancy, and childbirth (health issues for the mother and child) | Issues and ethics related to nature |
| Modern society and health | Prevention of and treating mental illness and stress | Protecting yourself (harm, illness, accidents) | Science and technology (ethics) |
| Modern infectious diseases and their prevention (STIs and AIDS) | Adapting to changes in daily life and learning (personal growth and health care) | Prevention of sexual offenses and crimes | Adapting to changes in daily life and learning (personal growth and health care) |
| Sexual desire and sexual activity | Sexual awareness and behavior | Relationship changes and challenges (family, in wider society) | The preciousness of life and living life to the fullest |
| Health management through each stage of life | Health management through each stage of life | Health management through each stage of life | Embracing diversity and respecting diverse lifestyles |
| The importance of acquiring accurate information | Welfare and support systems (unintended pregnancies, new mothers) | Welfare and support systems (unintended pregnancies, new mothers) | Creating a society free from discrimination (respect and understanding) |
| Gender and sexuality (respecting differences) | Gender and sexuality (respecting differences) | Gender and sexuality (respecting differences) | |
| Promoting sound and physical and mental health for healthy marriages | Promoting sound and physical and mental health for healthy marriages | Promoting sound and physical and mental health for healthy marriages | |
| Family planning (correct contraception methods, decision making, effects of abortion on a woman’s body & mind) | Family planning (correct contraception methods, decision making, effects of abortion on a woman’s body and mind) | Family planning (correct contraception methods, decision making, effects of abortion on a woman’s body and mind) | |
| | | Equitable relationships, cooperation and mutual respect | |
| | | Thinking critically (stereotypical gender roles, division of labor, and Japan’s systems surrounding the family unit) | |
| | | Responsible decision making and behavior (for life at home and in the community) | |
| | | Gaining factual and accurate information (online and about sex and sexuality) | |
| | | SNS (critical thinking skills, using IT and SNS responsibly and effectively, the dangers of digital footprints and data circulation) | |

At a glance, TMBoE’s sex education curriculum seems more thorough and comprehensive than MEXT’s Life Education curriculum. However, in order to compare it with the national curricula and that of UNESCO, it is essential to consider both the additions and omissions in the lesson contents. While some of this can be determined from the simple content analyses reflected in the tables, data analysis tools can provide insight and highlight the oft overlooked or unseen discrepancies between the curricula.

Looking first at the respective word clouds of each curriculum (see Figures 2, 3, and 4), it is clear that there are some similarities across the board, but there are some visible and significant differences. First, in MEXT’s curricula, sexual violence and a need for protection (rather than

prevention) rather than health-related matters or the prevention of intended pregnancies or STIs. More concerning is the frequency of “keep,” “distance,” and “others,” which as a means of self-protection is reasonable, but at the extreme end of the spectrum, it could lead to trust issues, anti-social behavior, and even social anxiety disorders. Unlike the word frequency findings from MEXT’s curricula, TMBoE’s most frequent nouns, “life” and “health,” once again highlight the importance placed on healthy behavior and life planning. Pertinent too is not only the fact that “sex,” “pregnancy,” and “disease” were frequently utilized, but “information” was also observed in both the JHS and HS curricula. Ensuring students have the appropriate literacy and skills to interpret information is crucial in the current context of misinformation dissemination. Notable too is that these media literacy and decision-making skills are also covered in UNESCO’s curriculum under Key Concept 5’s contents. Interestingly, “information” itself did not feature as prominently in UNESCO’s word frequency tallies. Instead, “gender,” “behavior,” “people,” and “relationships” were prevalent in both JHS and HS-equivalent level curricula. Considering that violence and abuse often stems from a lack of respect and equality, focusing on addressing these issues first is a reasonable approach from UNESCO.

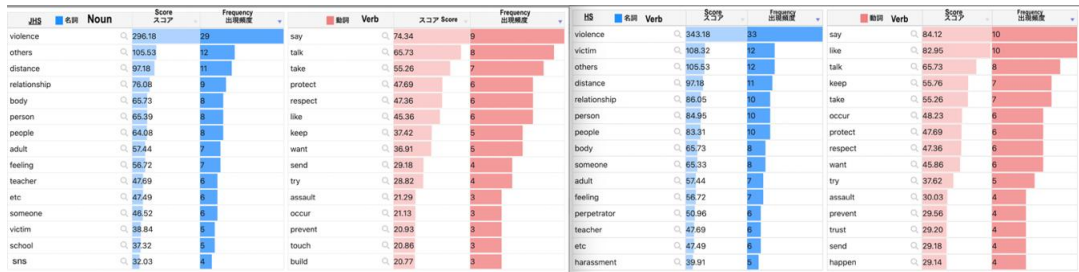


Figure 5. MEXT Curricula Word Frequency (Source: Author)



Figure 6. TMBoE Curricula Word Frequency (Source: Author)

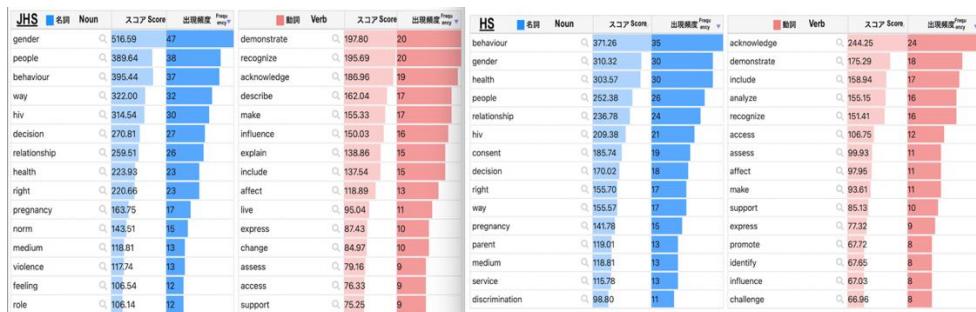


Figure 7. UNESCO Curricula Word Frequency (Source: Author)

As well as the word cloud and word frequency tallies, the cooccurrence charts below provide unique insight into the key concepts and bias of each curriculum. Unsurprisingly, in MEXT's cooccurrence charts, "sexual and "violence" as well as "victim" and "perpetrator" were often paired. Notable too is the cluster linking "send," "take," "naked," "underwear" (and picture). While this cooccurrence cluster was not noticeable in the word cloud or frequency tallies, its visibility in the cluster indicates that eradicating child sex exploitation is perhaps the one of the central government's key concerns. In contrast, TMBoE's cooccurrence chart indicates that greater emphasis is placed on disease prevention, responsible behavior, as well as personal growth and maturation. Although it is more comprehensive than MEXT's curricula, it lacks the diversity in content apparent in UNESCO's cooccurrence chart where subjects such as safe sex, giving consent, intimate partner violence, human rights, access to support and reproduction health are clearly visible and directly linked.

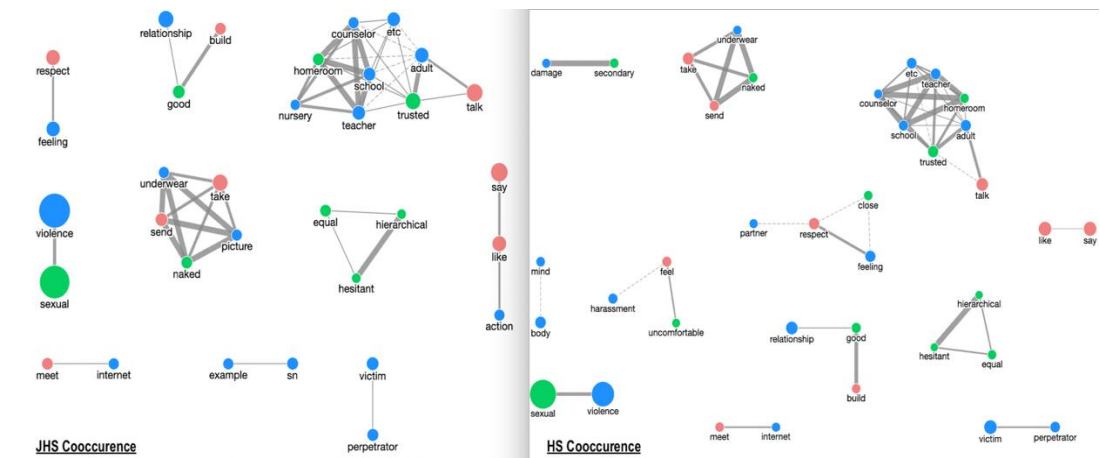


Figure 8. MEXT Curricula Cooccurrence (Source: Author)

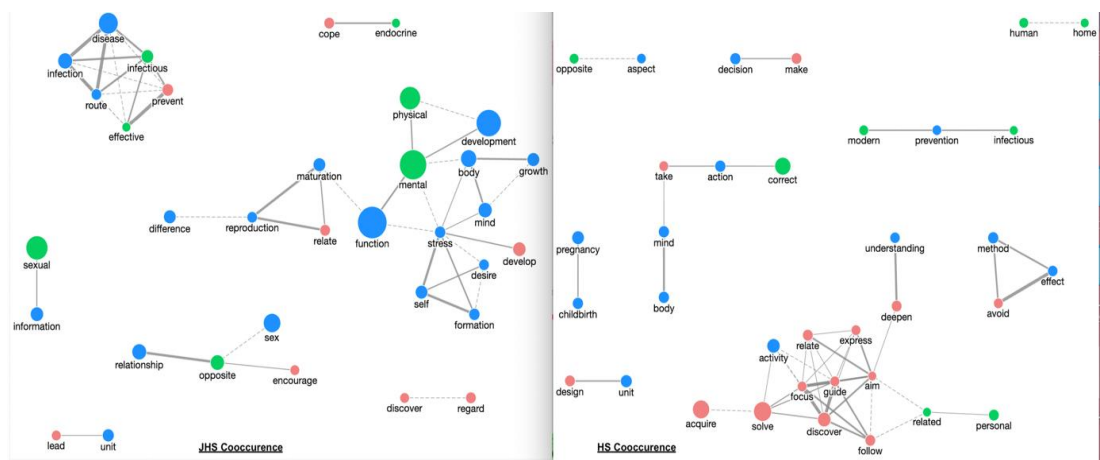


Figure 9. TMBoE Curricula Cooccurrence (Source: Author)

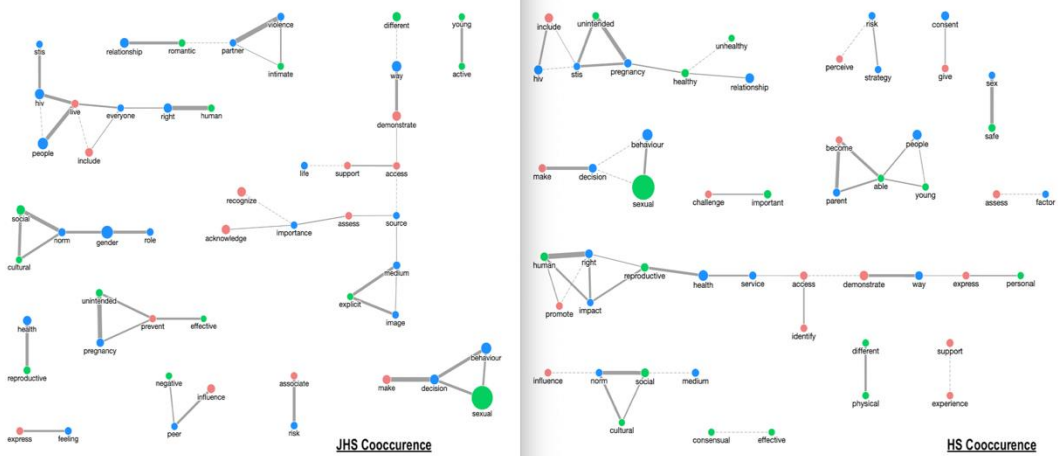


Figure 10. UNESCO Curricula Cooccurrence (Source: Author)

While the findings of the content analysis seem to indicate that TMBoE’s curricula go above and beyond what is listed in MEXT’s “Life Safety Education” in terms of the scope of the content, determining the extent to which they cover both MEXT and UNESCO’s areas of study can reveal what needs to be addressed or done in order to negotiate both domestic and international standards. Looking first at how TMBoE’s weighs up against MEXT’s areas of study in Table 5, it is clear that over half of the topics are not explicitly outlined in TMBoE’s curricula. While the dangers of social media and some aspects of sexual harassment and sexual violence are taught, dating and domestic violence or even the effects of sexual violence have been omitted. Furthermore, whether TMBoE’s curricula address the issue of sexual harassment associated with gender- and sexual-identity is unclear. However, considering the amount of time and over-emphasis placed on assault, violence, and harassment in MEXT’s curricula, it is reasonable to assume that TMBoE prioritized other matters such as contraception and safe sex practices.

Table 5. Comparing TMBoE and MEXT’s Curricula (Source: Author)

| Respect for oneself and others | The dangers of social media | Sexual assault/violence (SV) | Dating violence/IPV | JK business /compensation dating | Sexual harassment (SH) |
|---|--|--|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Respecting and protecting one’s personal space (emotional and physical) >NO | The risks of online hook-ups >YES | Defining SV >YES | Defining domestic violence >NO | The dangers of online hook-ups >YES | Definitions (verbal, non-verbal) >YES |
| Good relationship building skills >YES | The risks of sending/receiving sexually explicit images >YES | Types of SV (non-physical, physical) >NO | Defining dating violence >NO | | Examples of SH >YES |
| Learning to say ‘no’ & boundary creation skills >NO | How/where to get help >YES | Why it occurs >YES | Types of dating violence >NO | | Gender identity and SH >NO |

| | | | | | |
|--|--|--|---|--|----------------------------|
| | | Prevention >YES | Recognizing coercive control >NO | | Sexual identity and SH >NO |
| | | Prevention of secondary damage >NO | Learning to say 'no' and boundary creation skills >NO | | Recognizing SH >YES |
| | | Physical & psychological effects of SV >NO | | | |
| | | Stop victim blaming, stress assailant accountability, zero tolerance >NO | | | |
| | | How to protect yourself (before, during, and after an incident) >YES | | | |
| | | How/where to get help >YES | | | |

While TMBoE’s curricula do not explicitly address a fair amount of MEXT’s sub-topics, to some extent they seem to cover the majority of topics in UNESCO’s key concepts. Nevertheless, some topics have only been partially covered or not taught at all. Some of these crucial topics include consent, privacy and bodily integrity; body image; communication, refusal and negotiation skills; and peer influence on sexual behavior. Given that sexual violence is rampant in schools (Morioka, 2022) and STIs and eating disorders are on the rise in Japan (NIID, 2019; Japan Times, 2021), neglecting these topics will potentially exacerbate the situation. In addition, considering that Japan’s gender equality rankings are at the bottom of the East Asia and Pacific group, and the Group of Seven major economies (Mainichi, 2022), ignoring both gender-based violence (GBV) and the construction of gender (and gender norms) is arguably detrimental to any SDG-related efforts to improve gender equality. In regard to the “Good health and well-being” SDG, although the prevention of AIDS is emphasized in TMBoE’s curricula, the stigma, care, and treatment of AIDS is excluded. Reducing stigma and increasing awareness about methods of treatment not only promotes good health and well-being seeking practices, but it provides critical information for individuals who might have contracted HIV or know someone who has.

One of the other topics which is probably avoided in many sexual education syllabi in conservative cultures is sexual response (as well as romantic relationships and sexual behavior). Although conception, pregnancy, and childbirth are covered under TMBoE’s “biology” category, the process before that is vague. Not acknowledging that healthy romantic relationships often lead to sexual behavior/exploration might encourage some students to assume that sex is something reserved for pro-creation (rather than an expression of love or a pleasurable activity). Simply regarding sex in terms of its reproductive function and ignoring the importance of romantic relationships and sexual exploration seems to go against notions of bodily integrity and sexual independence. Needless to say, depending on the culture, it can be taboo or awkward to teach or talk about sexual pleasure and intercourse, so it is understandable that it is omitted from many curricula. Moreover, given that the amount of time dedicated to sexual education can be quite limited, romantic relationships and sexual response might not be the board of education’s top priority. However, excluding these topics can lead to skewed or false ideas about sex or

relying on dubious information from unreputable online sources. To avoid this situation, a more comprehensive approach to sexual education is recommended.

Table 6. Comparing TMBøE and UNESCO’s Curricula (Source: Author)

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| Key concept 1: Relationships | Key concept 2: Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality | Key concept 3: Understanding Gender |
| Topics: 1.1 Families >Yes 1.2 Friendship, Love and Romantic Relationships >covers friendships, but not love & romantic relationships 1.3 Tolerance, Inclusion and Respect >Yes, but not “inclusion” 1.4 Long-term Commitments and Parenting >covers marriage, but not parenting | Topics: 2.1 Values and Sexuality 2.2 Human Rights and Sexuality 2.3 Culture, Society and Sexuality Sexuality is vaguely mentioned. No focus on “rights” or details on diverse sexualities (only briefly alluded to when mentioning the need to “respect other people’s lifestyles”) | Topics: 3.1 The Social Construction of Gender and Gender Norms >No 3.2 Gender Equality, Stereotypes and Bias >Yes 3.3 Gender-based Violence >No |
| Key concept 4: Violence and Staying Safe | Key concept 5: Skills for Health and Well-being | Key concept 6: The Human Body and Development |
| Topics: 4.1 Violence >Yes 4.2 Consent, Privacy and Bodily Integrity >No 4.3 Safe use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) >Yes | Topics: 5.1 Norms and Peer Influence on Sexual Behaviour >No 5.2 Decision-making >Yes 5.3 Communication, Refusal and Negotiation Skills >No 5.4 Media Literacy and Sexuality >Yes 5.5 Finding Help and Support >Yes | Topics: 6.1 Sexual and Reproductive Anatomy and Physiology >Yes 6.2 Reproduction >Yes 6.3 Puberty >Yes 6.4 Body Image >No |
| Key concept 7: Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour | Key concept 8: Sexual and Reproductive Health | |
| Topics: 7.1 Sex, Sexuality and the Sexual Life Cycle >No 7.2 Sexual Behaviour and Sexual Response >Sexual behavior is mentioned but not detailed. Sexual response is not covered. | Topics: 8.1 Pregnancy and Pregnancy Prevention >Yes 8.2 HIV and AIDS Stigma, Care, Treatment and Support >Yes, but stigma, care, treatment & support are not covered. 8.3 Understanding, Recognizing and Reducing the Risk of STIs, including HIV >Yes | |

Aims

Having analyzed and discussed the various curricula, it is critical to note that the aims of a course can significantly influence the content. For this reason, it was necessary to take into account the aims of each curriculum in order to provide insight into how it might have shaped the content. First, let us consider the overall aims of MEXT’s “Life Safety Education.” Essentially, in response to rising cases of child abuse and sexual violence, the newly implemented “Life Safety Education” states:

In order to prevent children from becoming perpetrators, victims, or witnesses of sexual violence, it is important to promote “Life Safety Education” at schools and other institutions, including preschool and childcare [...] To prevent them from becoming perpetrators, victims, or witnesses of sexual violence, students learn the value of life, correctly understand the misconceptions and behaviors that underlie sexual violence, and the effects of sexual violence. In addition, students learn to value life and to respect themselves, others, and each other according to their developmental stage. (MEXT, 2021)

Rather limited in scope, these aims perhaps account for the over-emphasis on sexual violence and prevention of abuse which was observed in the content analysis. To expand on this,

TMBöE's aims are as follows:

In recent years, as the environment surrounding children and students has changed, such as changes in the social environment and the development of an information-oriented society, there has been a flood of information in schools about the prevention of STIs in minors, induced abortion, and gender identity. It is necessary to respond appropriately to various issues such as having a correct understanding of sexual orientation. With its aims to promote character-building, as part of "Life Safety Education," our sex education curriculum is rooted in the concepts "Respect for Life," "Respect for Individuals," and "Respect for Human Rights," which are the foundations of the education system. (TMBöE, 2019, p1)

Evidently, TMBöE has recognized that as well as the dangers of sexual violence, the dangers of misinformation about sex and sexual health can have devastating outcomes. Moreover, in its attempts to design its curricula in line with international/UNESCO standards, emphasis has been placed on human rights, individual rights and of course, respect. As for UNESCO, although its curricula are comprehensive, its major aims have been described as such:

The goals of the key concepts, topics and learning objectives are to equip children and young people with the knowledge, attitudes and skills that will empower them to realize their health, well-being and dignity; consider the well-being of others affected by their choices; understand and act upon their rights; and respect the rights of others by: providing scientifically-accurate, incremental, age- and developmentally-appropriate, gender-sensitive, culturally relevant and transformative information about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality; providing young people with the opportunity to explore values, attitudes and social and cultural norms and rights impacting sexual and social relationships; and, promoting the acquisition of life skills. (UNESCO, 2018, p.34)

Although more detailed and culturally sensitive than TMBöE's aims, their respective aims are similar in many respects. However, as opposed to "character building," UNESCO's aims to "empower" and "provide the opportunity to explore" suggests its methods of instruction or approach is more student-centered rather than passive. By encouraging personal growth and agency rather than molding students in the guise of "character building," UNESCO's more liberal approach would enhance TMBöE's curriculum design. In any case, as with its lesson contents, TMBöE's aims are more progressive and relatively in line with UNESCO's standards. It is important to note too that while aims can be noble and idealistic, whether they are successfully accomplished in a classroom context is another matter altogether.

Conclusion

In an age in which health crises and body autonomy are constantly being debated, countries worldwide are creating new measures or policies to deal with the ever-changing circumstances. Since some of these laws or policies can range from draconian to progressive, it is critical to

implement comprehensive sex education for individuals who lack more freedoms or protection.

At the time of writing, Spain introduced a new sexual consent bill which requires explicit consent to be given and thus classifies nonconsensual sex as rape (Yeong, 2022). Meanwhile in 2021, when objecting to a proposal to raise the age of consent from 13 to 16 in Japan, a middle-aged Japanese politician said it was acceptable for older people to have consensual sex with a 14-year-old and getting arrested over it is “absurd” (Kanno, 2021). In the same year, MEXT introduced its Life Safety Education curricula, which, as this research has illustrated, primarily aims to prevent children from becoming perpetrators, victims, or witnesses of sexual violence. The aim of this research was to determine and demonstrate how prefectural boards of education can adopt and adapt MEXT’s curricula to provide students with a more critical and comprehensive sex education which is in line with UNESCO’s standards and SDGs. Although the findings from this study provide some insight into the current state of sex education in Japan, there are some major limitations to this study that ought to be acknowledged. Firstly, as the sole researcher was the author, the objectivity associated with the interpretation of the findings is questionable since the use of multiple raters to review the data is essential to mitigate possible bias that may occur. Another factor to take into account is that teachers responsible for sex education might opt to use other materials or add/omit some content, thus the content examined in this study might not reflect the bigger picture.

In any case, the findings of this study revealed that although TMBoE’s curricula covers most of the key concepts in UNESCO’s curricula, it fails to explicitly address matters such as consent, privacy and bodily integrity; body image; communication, refusal and negotiation skills; and peer influence on sexual behavior. Moreover, subjects such as sexual intercourse and sexual response have been omitted. Not knowing how one actually has sex, how to say no, the importance of consent or that sex has more than a reproductive function arguably legitimizes (or creates a breeding ground for) nonconsensual sex or rape-related pregnancy. With dwindling fertility rates worldwide, excluding the aforementioned topics could be considered a strategy for the conservative coalition to inadvertently push its pro-natalist agenda and boost the nation’s fertility rate. However dismal or far-fetched as this may seem, it is important to note that not all teachers follow the curriculum as required and that even in the United States sex education is not mandatory in some states. In this light, one could argue that at least students in Tokyo, or even Japan for that matter, are receiving some kind of sex education. Furthermore, in the age of information, students can easily access topics not covered in class via credible sex education YouTubers and channels such as Shiori Onuki and Shelly no Ofuroba. NPOs such as ‘PILCON’ and the recently established ‘Mimosas’ also provide vital sex education related information and services to cover ground that education institutions fail to. In an age of ever-increasing surveillance and infringements on human rights (including body autonomy) by governments or regimes, access to accurate, uncensored information and health and well-being related resources/services has become crucial. Under such circumstances, one’s right to education, and particularly a comprehensive one, should not only be emphasized, but prioritized.

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