The topic on sex education has been shrouded with a lot of controversy especially in African countries and societies. As Edson (1935) puts it,

Much confusion exists as to the meaning of sex education. To many it means only the telling of the story of life origins to children. To others it implies giving facts about the reproductive function and sex hygiene. To still others it connotes instruction about venereal diseases. For another group it includes information about the physical adjustments of marriage and about child- bearing. And for a limited number it denotes a much broader education, including the foregoing factors and many others, but with emphasis on conduct rather than on instruction. (p. 361)

The African community is usually a community that has been for a very long time, a conservative community. Talks on relationships and sex usually are seen as ‘taboo’ conversations and are usually avoided from the basic social unit which is the family. Kenya, being no exception to this attitude. Seeing as this is the general perspective most of us have when it comes to the topic of sex, one can easily see how sex education can be enshrouded in this cloud of controversy. Yet we fail to see the importance of having this conversation with each other and especially young people. Sex education has the capability of combating to a reasonable degree, the issue of teenage pregnancies and abortion. Keeping this in mind we first have to understand the issue and effects of early teenage pregnancies and abortions so that we can understand some of the importance of sex education.

**Early teenage pregnancy and abortion in Kenya.**

According to a report from the National Council for Population and Development (2017), 1 in every 5 school going teenage girl in Kenya gets pregnant by the age of 20 (p. 1). This represents 20 percent of the school going teenage girls in our country. This figure is very alarming to say the least. There are many downsides to having this high of a figure when it comes to teenage pregnancy. As Blair (1999) points out,

Teenage mothers are less likely to finish their education, less likely to find a good job, and more likely to end up both as single parents and bringing up their children in poverty. The children themselves run a much greater risk of poor health, and have a much higher chance of becoming teenage mothers themselves (p. 4).

This is evidenced by the high number of teenage school dropouts, especially girls since they have to take a break to take care for their new-born children. Blair (1999) adds that, “the risk of teenage parenthood is greatest for young people who have grown up in poverty and disadvantage or those with poor educational attainment” (p. 17). Most of the girls eventually give up on their pursuit of obtaining basic and university education all together. They are forced to search for informal sources of incomes so as to be able to support their new family, which in turns put them at risk of being pushed further into poverty as most of these girls come from financially challenged backgrounds. The boys who father these children most often than not avoid the responsibility all together which leaves the girl left to bear the responsibility of bearing and raising a child. For the boys who decide to accept responsibility, commonly opt to drop out to find jobs in the informal sector of the market so as to be able to fend for their newfound family and thus are usually subjected to a life of hardships.

Another effect of early teenage pregnancy is the increased rate of abortions, which is still illegal in Kenya. These are usually done in shabby, ‘backstreet’ places where it is very dangerous, done by unqualified people or doctors, using dangerous equipment and unregulated methods or use of unregulated medicinal pills that have effects unknown to professionals in case of mishaps. The risks are very high as found out by Shukri, F., Chimaraoke, I., Ann M., Mutua, M., Kimani-Murage, W., Ziraba, A., ...Caroline Egesa, C. (2015):

The risks of unsafe abortion run along a continuum ranging from severe morbidity (haemorrhage, sepsis, organ failure) to no complications. While abortion is getting safer worldwide, evidence indicates a higher rate of hospitalization due to unsafe abortion complications for the Eastern Africa region (10 per 1000 women aged 15–44 years) than for sub-Saharan Africa overall (7.5 per 1000 women aged 15–44 years). (p.1)

These figures represent the levels of unsafe abortions being carried out in East Africa, Kenya being a member state.

**Sex education and its effects.**

Introducing sex education in primary and secondary levels of schooling brings to mind a few questions that need to be answered. Some of the questions that arises is what is sex education? At what stage should sex education be introduced? What are the effects of introducing sex education? All these are important queries that can help demystify the assumptions we have on what sex education truly is. Trying to understand what sex education is, as Edson (1935) points out, “If education is that process, combined of fact- giving, interpretations, setting of ideals, and guidance, which helps the individual meet his life situations, sex education should be the similar process that helps the individual meet those situations in which sex is an important fact” (p. 361). Looking at it from this perspective we see that sex education would guide the learner tackle situations involving sex by giving them facts and setting their ideals.

As children grow up, they start asking questions arising from their impressions of their environment. Naturally this makes them curious as to what, why and how their world works. Eventually as they grow, they will ask questions that involve aspects of reproduction and birth (Levine, 1966). As Levine (1966) argues, “These questions should be correctly answered when asked, for the manner in which they are answered will in large part contribute towards the bettering or upsetting of the child's sex attitudes” (p.11). Since the way we portray ourselves to children leaves a lasting impression on them, Levine (1966) suggests that should we introduce sex education at pre-school level, which we should, with active roles from both parents and teachers, following some cardinal guidelines:

1. Always tell the truth - A child who knows he has been truthfully answered will feel free to ask further questions of the adult rather than seek information elsewhere, information which all too often is distorted or inaccurate.

2. Never put off answering - A child should not be made to feel that these are subjects the adult tries to avoid.

3. Use correct terms - An avoidance of proper terminology sooner or later suggests to the child that this is a subject of some mysterious significance.

4. Answer as much as the child desires and no more - This is specifically directed to children under the age of six. Too much information at one time to such young children may be overwhelming, at times even upsetting.

These guidelines if properly followed will help the child in emulating such proper ideals when they grow up, impacting their social lives positively. Having this in mind we see how it is important, as Levine (1966) reiterates, apart from elementary and secondary levels of education, “it should always be remembered that the basic and probably most important attitudes are gained during the nursery school and kindergarten” (p.15). As Edson (1935) acknowledges, “with other types of education, incidents met in the early years, when they are few and less difficult, fashion techniques for meeting later and more complex ones. Hence, for the most part, sex education is both a graded and a gradual process (p. 362)”. This puts more emphasis of early sex education should be introduced at an early stage, preferably at pre-school level, teaching the young children simple topics that might pique their interests with proper and regulated guidelines, and as they grow, they can tackle more and more complex issues regarding sex and sexual education. This kind of education is ought to go on up until the person has matured emotionally and mentally since matters regarding sex do not only affect us physically, but emotionally and mentally as well. Having a firm foundation is paramount in having a successful social and physical life and the earlier we establish our roots the better.

One effect of sex education being introduced in elementary and high school levels of education is that it raises awareness on early teenage sexual behaviours. As Oettinger (1999) accepts that there is a plethora of factors that contribute to the causes of early teenage pregnancies, from his studies, he suggests that, “sex education had some causal influence on teen sexual behaviour, and it seems likely that an important source of this causal link was the provision of information that altered the risks of sexual activity” (p. 642). It seems that there is some correlation between sex education and awareness of the risk in indulging in sexual activities. Some of the risk include spread of sexually transmitted infections and unwanted teenage pregnancy. With this awareness, students are likely to avoid sexual activities and thus reduce the occurrence of early teenage pregnancies and thus affecting the rising cases of abortion, lowering the number of girls who would undergo it if they discovered they were pregnant.

Another effect of sex education being that it helps support young children and adolescents by giving them social and emotional help from social and emotional learning programs that are contained in part of the sex education curriculum. As Yaeger (2017) points out, “adolescence is a period of tremendous learning, exploration, and opportunity. Yet it’s also a time when behavioural and health problems can emerge or worsen, with negative consequences that last mong int adulthood” (p. 74). He continues to show evidence of the importance of this formative stage as it can make or break the teen’s behaviour. Yaeger (2007) points out that with proper social and emotional learning, “effective programs can prevent catastrophic outcomes, such as unwanted pregnancy, arrests for violent crime, or dropping out if high school” (p.74). Many programs, youths are taught skills for refusing sex and abstinence but after further studies have shown that these methods/programs have no effect in the reduction of early teenage pregnancies (Yaeger 2007 p. 77). One of these social and emotional programs, Teen Outreach, which is a volunteer program for teens who are between the ages of 14 and 18 has shown a reduction in the number of teenage pregnancy cases even though more than 85 percent of its content does not involve any discussion of sex (Yaeger 2007 p.77). These classes had community service to show the value of making the community better, received training in areas like self-confidence and social skills. Seeing how these programs benefitted students in the United States of America, there is sufficient evidence to show that with the right programs being taught under the sex education curriculum it helps young teens gain confidence, make better- and well-informed decisions that go in the long way to reduce cases of early teenage pregnancy and abortion.

The third effect of early sex education is that it sensitizes young youths and adults about preventative and contraceptive methods. It would be ideal to believe that everyone would practice abstinence but unfortunately this is not the case. As the saying goes, prevention is better than cure, is applicable in this situation. Preventative methods have reduced the risk of unwanted teenage pregnancies by a huge margin. As a result, “high prevalence of contraceptive use has been shown to reduce the number of abortions in a population and healthcare costs” (p. 373) as cited by Väisänen (2015). Even though it comes at a cost as Sánchez-Páez and Ortega (2018) notes that, “There would have been higher adolescent fertility if contraceptive use had not increased over time, and there is still a strong potential reduction of adolescent fertility by satisfying current demand levels. Our analysis shows that increasing levels of contraceptive use by sexually active unmarried adolescents play an important role in explaining the reductions observed in adolescent fertility in many countries.” (p. 1376). After conducting their research on women aged 15-19 who were unmarried and sexually active in Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa, they came to that conclusion but at the same time they agree that “Meeting their contraceptive needs can, therefore, avoid unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions” (p. 1377).

On the other hand, early sex education has its fair share of criticism. Oettinger (1999) acknowledges that:

Sex education also may have been associated with earlier first pregnancies for these women, but this effect is smaller and less significant than the effect on sexual activity. For both outcomes, sex education generally seems to have had a larger impact in the early teen years and for women without older siblings. Finally, the association between sex education and transitions into sexual activity was much smaller and weaker for males from this cohort than for females.

This shows that there is an argument that can be made to show the correlation between sex education being taught and a rise in sexual activity, be it how small the relationship between the two might be. At the same time the widespread of preventative measures has led to the increase in sexual activity amongst young teenagers as Garris, Steckler and McIntire (1976) find that the results of their study, “indicate that a direct relationship does exist between taking oral contraceptives and at least the frequency of premarital sexual intercourse” (p.140).

In conclusion, we see that the benefits if introducing early sex education heavily outweigh the cons that are perceived and or associated with it. It has the potential of combatting early teenage pregnancy and abortion if utilized carefully and have properly developed structures. It is about time we embrace such changes as a country if we would like to have a well-developed society full of competent young teenagers and adults and it is by taking such strides that we will reach to such heights.

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