

Teaching Sexual Education in Schools in Panama

Neelam Khemlani

Estudiante de la Licenciatura en Inglés,
ISAE Universidad
nckhemlani@yahoo.com

Tilsia Owens

Estudiante de la Licenciatura en Inglés,
ISAE Universidad
tilsia51@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT

The absence of Sexual Education in the schools of Panama is one of the major cause that more and more young girls to become pregnant before the age of twenty-four. This result can be attributed to many reasons, such as messages given through social media, advertisements, and songs that show girls in scanty clothing and make this seem likely to be the road to popularity to these young girls. In addition to this, parents in general spend very little time with their children and communicate with them even less. Basically, this leaves children to grow and fend for themselves at a very young age. It then forces these same youths to make decisions about issues they themselves do not fully comprehend the consequences. The result in consequence is promiscuous behavior with no limits by society. Institutions like the church also do not want to get involved because having sexual relations before marriage is forbidden. When there are no controls in a community because of scarcity of supervision, the schools should take the lead in educating the population so as to avoid the social problems attached to early pregnancies. Unfortunately, this topic is tabooed in many communities and it has received great resistance from parents and churches who have protested against it being taught in classrooms. By not teaching Sexual Education, the cycle of early pregnancies continues. This study surveyed a random group of teachers in the Republic of Panama about their point of views on teaching Sexual Education in the classroom. For the purposes of this research paper, we focus on the effect of Sexual Education in a school setting, and the problem with incorporating information related to sexuality in a classroom.

Key words: Sexual Education, early pregnancy, unwanted pregnancy, contraception, Panama, Law 61.

RESUMEN

La ausencia de Educación Sexual en las escuelas de Panamá es una de las principales causas de que más y más niñas jóvenes queden embarazadas antes de los 24 años. Este resultado puede atribuirse a muchas razones, como mensajes enviados a través de las redes sociales, anuncios, y canciones que muestran a las chicas con poca ropa y hacen que esto parezca ser el camino hacia la popularidad para estas jóvenes; Además, los padres en general, pasan muy poco tiempo con sus hijos, y se comunican con ellos aún menos. Básicamente, esto deja a los niños crecer y valerse por sí mismos a una edad muy temprana. Luego obliga a estos mismos jóvenes a tomar decisiones sobre cuestiones que ellos mismos no comprenden completamente las consecuencias. El resultado, en consecuencia, es un comportamiento promiscuo sin límites por parte de la sociedad. Las instituciones como la iglesia tampoco quieren involucrarse porque las relaciones sexuales antes del matrimonio están prohibidas. Cuando no hay controles en una comunidad, debido a la escasez de supervisión, las escuelas deben tomar la iniciativa de educar a la población, para evitar los problemas sociales asociados a los embarazos precoces. Desafortunadamente, este tema es tabú en muchas comunidades, y ha recibido una gran resistencia por parte de los padres y las iglesias que han protestado en contra de que se enseñe en las aulas. Al no enseñar Educación Sexual, el ciclo de embarazos tempranos continúa. Este estudio encuestó a un grupo aleatorio de maestros en la república de Panamá sobre sus puntos de vista sobre la enseñanza de la educación sexual en el aula. Para los propósitos de este trabajo de investigación, nos enfocamos en el efecto de la Educación Sexual en el entorno escolar y el problema de incorporar información relacionada con la sexualidad en un salón de clases.

Palabras clave: Educación sexual, embarazo precoz, embarazo no deseado, anticoncepción, Panamá, Ley 61.

Fecha de recepción, febrero 2019

Fecha de aprobación, marzo 2019

BACKGROUND

Sexual Education has been around for decades, and was first introduced in Sweden as early as 1955. Western European countries followed in the 1970s and 1980s, and by the 1990s and early 2000s, France, The United Kingdom, Portugal, Spain, Estonia, Ukraine, and Armenia introduced Sexuality Education in the classroom. It was not until 2003 that Ireland made this type of education compulsory in both primary and secondary schools. What is interesting to mention is that although education in sexuality has been implemented in classroom settings for the longest time; its purpose has changed throughout the ages to focus on the public health priorities of the time.

"It started with the prevention of unintended pregnancy (1960s-70s), then moved on to the prevention of HIV (1980s) and awareness about sexual abuse (1990s), finally embracing the prevention of sexism, homophobia and on line bullying from 2000 onwards. Today, an analysis of gender norms and reflections on gender inequality are important parts of sexuality education". (Sexuality Education, 2015)

In Central America, the need for Sexual Education has recently become important. countries in this section of the world have seen an increasing number of young girls getting pregnant. Many factors need to be taken into consideration; among these are the level of education, cultural and religious beliefs, and socio-economic status.

Various studies done on this problem is by Douglas Kirby who indicates the results in schools in the United States where conclusions are similar to what is currently been seen in places like Panama.

"First, involvement in and attachment to school and plans to attend higher education are all related to less sexual risk-taking and lower pregnancy rates. Second, students in schools with manifestations of poverty and disorganization are more likely to become pregnant". (Kirby, 2010)

In other words, the effect of school involvement is visibly marked in the public and private school sectors. There are more pregnant girls in the

former than the latter. This also goes hand in hand with the parents' level of education which is tied in with their socio-economic status.

Current situation of sexual education in Panama

Pregnancies and sexual transmitted diseases in teenagers and young girls is a major problem in Panama. One of these problems seems to be the lack of knowledge about Sexual Education in the school-going population. For this reason, there is a rising amount of people want to include Sexual Education in schools. However, the topic is a cause for controversy among individuals who are opposed to Sexual Education because they consider that this encourages the minors into having sex. According with a clinical report that shows us evidence about the topic, this reveals us that:

"Sexuality Education is more than the instruction of children and adolescent on anatomy and the physiology of biological sex and reproductions. It covers healthy sexual development, gender identity, interpersonal relationships, affection, sexual development, intimacy, and body image for all adolescents, including adolescents with disabilities, chronic health conditions, and other special needs". (Breuner & Mattson, 2016)

Kids and teenagers need to be prepared to assume responsibilities in their life. There is a high rate of teenage pregnancy in our country and it is necessary to reduce it. One of the obstacles in Panama is the government and the position of the Catholic Church. They don't seem to agree on the subject of Sexual Education. This is not only the problem of one institution; it is a national situation that includes all Panamanians: "Healthy sexuality is influenced by ethnic, racial, cultural, personal, religious, and moral concerns". (Breuner & Mattson, 2016)

A report from the Ministry of Health (MINSA) reveals that between January and February of this year 1,572 cases of teenage pregnancies were registered at a rate of one every 54 minutes. In 2016, only 60 pregnant students were registered in the primary sector.

According to statistics, in the last seven years, in 2016, the most cases were registered in middle and high school students. As for the primary level, it was the third highest figure in the same period of time. "It is complicated for an elementary school girl to have to face a pregnancy when she should be playing with dolls, tea sets and being fashionable". As we said more than once, all these statistics should help to finally convince officials to include Sexual Education in school curricula. It is as important as mathematics or social sciences.

As these girls grow, they become even more confused. They grow up within a culture where the greatest influence comes from their peers, television, magazines, and the media, where the message delivered is often perplexing. According to statistics, adolescents become fertile about 4 or 5 years before being emotionally mature. What is worse is that they are not prepared to know their contraceptive options. This, added to the lack of a correct line of Sexual Education in schools, is the basis of our reality. (Marshall, 2018)

According to figures from the Ministry of Health (MINSA), during 2017, nine thousand nine hundred and twelve (9,912) pregnant minors between the ages of 10 and 19 were treated in public health facilities. The main question of sociologists focused on were the whereabouts of the parents and the discipline that is put in place at home. "Education starts at home and if there are no good examples, what futures can that girl who is curious and in the process of development have". (BMJ, 2002)

Although it has become normal to see pregnant students wearing public school uniforms through the streets, seeing a primary school girl with a pregnant belly is a situation that is "not tolerable and deserves to be investigated". (BMJ, 2002)

According to the investigation by the United Nations done through the WHO (World Health Organization) in Panama, religion promotes abstinence as the way to go, however, according to the facts, this is not practiced nor it is practical considering children will do it anyway, even though all groups in favor of the law are well aware of the fact, and will concur, that abstinence is the

safest way to avoid STDs, HIV and unwanted pregnancies. This is why the country is so divided. Religious groups promote and enforce one message and many sectors of civil society defend another. (Arcia, 2018)

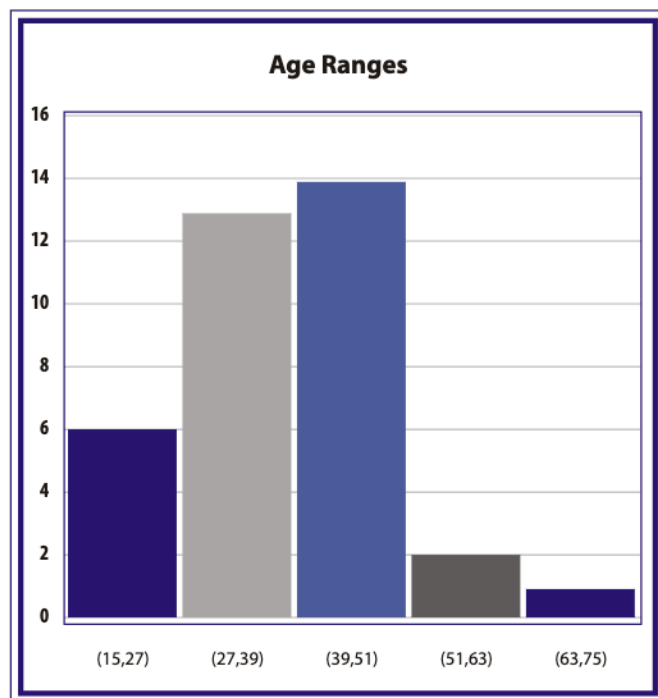
METHODOLOGY

Questions were formulated and complied in a survey which was sent digitally and physically as the need arose. A Likert scale was used to find out peoples' opinion on eight statements.

Finally, two yes/no questions were included which were aimed at knowing whether teachers surveyed had any training in sexual education and if they were acquainted with the content of Law 61. Results were entered and data was analyzed to determine teachers' opinions toward Sexual Education in the classroom with direct reference to early pregnancies in girls. A total of 36 teachers were surveyed in this sample.

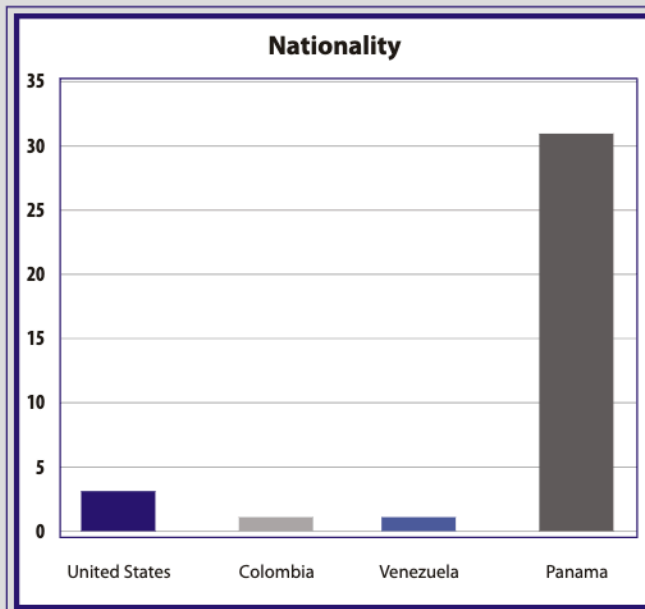
Results and analysis

There were 36 surveys given. The age ranges of the participants were between 15 - 71. The greatest percentage of the sample was between 39 to 51 years of age. This age range represented 38.88% of the sample.



Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

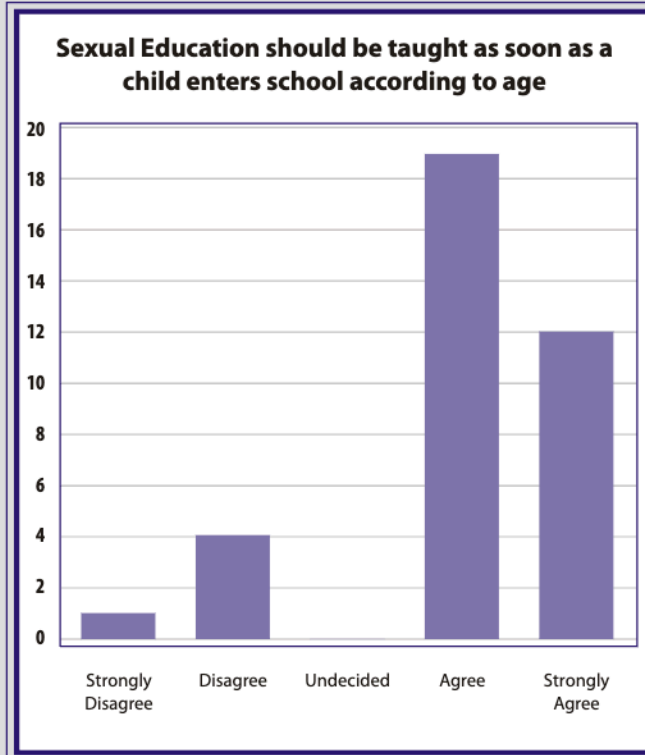
The nationalities surveyed included teachers from the United States (8.33%), Colombia (2.77%), Venezuela (2.77%), and Panama (86.11%). Panamanian teachers made up most of the sample surveyed. Thus, the results are in great part a reflection of the opinions of Panamanians.



Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

Statement 1

Sexual Education should be introduced as soon as children enter school and explained according to their age.



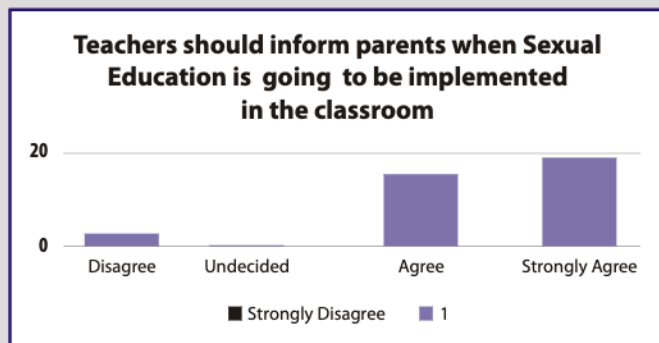
Source: Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

There were more assertive responses to this statement. More than half of the sample surveyed (52.77%) agreed that Sexual Education should be taught as

soon as a child enters school and explained according to their age and 33.33% strongly agreed. There were a total of 5 respondents who mostly disagreed and 2.77% strongly disagreed. What is interesting to note here is that no response was undecided.

Statement 2

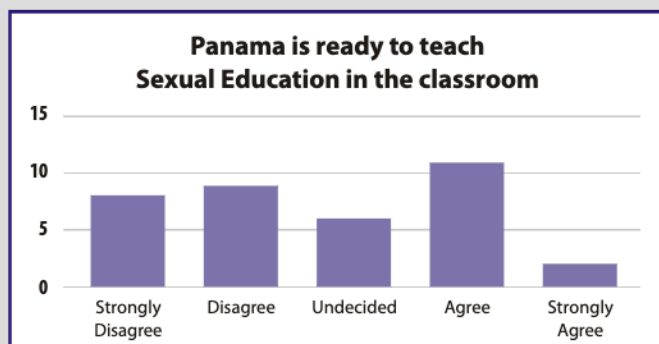
Teachers should inform parents when they are going to implement Sexual Education in the classroom.



Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

Statement 3

Panama is ready to teach sexual education in the classroom.



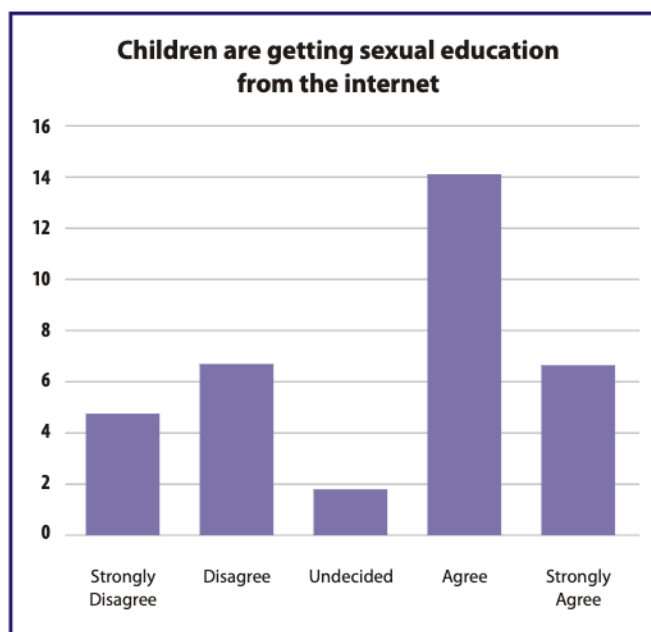
Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

As was expected, teachers agree to a great extent in informing parents when Sexual Education is being taught in the curriculum. This is both important so that the home and school front are on the same page and necessary to have support when the topic is taught. More than half of the sample strongly agreed (52.78%) to the statement and 41.67% agreed. Once again, there were no undecided people on this issue and the respondents that either strongly disagreed or simply disagreed were few.

Statement 4

Results on this statement were distributed across the range of given choices with the smallest number of surveyed teachers strongly agreeing (5.55%) and the largest number of the sample agreeing (30.55%). Although this survey may not be large enough to be representative of the teaching population in the Republic of Panama, the results obtained indicate that there is somewhat of an acceptance to the idea of imparting Sexual Education classes. This said, the number of respondents who strongly disagreed, disagreed, or were undecided was well-distributed.

Children are getting sexual education from the internet.

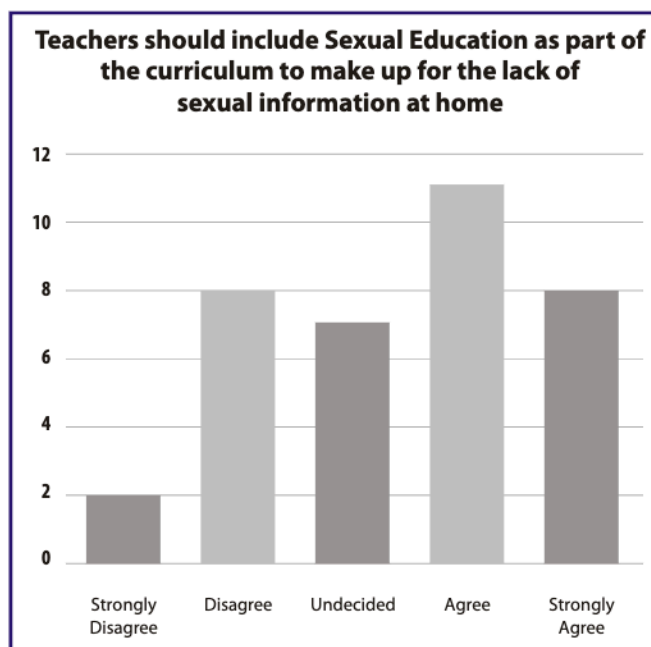


Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

This item had mixed responses. Most of the surveyed teachers agreed with the statement (41.67%) and only 5.55% of the sample was undecided. The strongly agree and strongly disagree options got the same number of responses and 13.89% strongly disagreed. Even though most agreed with the statement, it would be interesting to know what is the content of the sexual education these children see and if it includes pornography in any way.

Statement 5

Teachers should include Sexual Education as part of the curriculum to make up for the lack of sexual information at home.

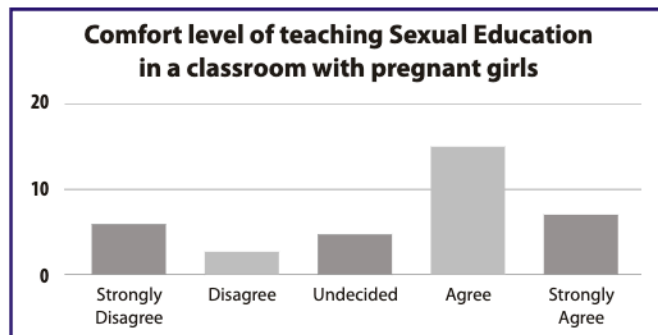


Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

Opinions were once again mixed with regard to including Sexual Education in the curriculum. This could be in part because of varied religious and cultural beliefs shared by teachers in Panama. It could also be the case because the topic in itself has generated much controversy and resistance from influential leaders in the community. On a positive note however, most teachers agreed with this statement (30.56%) and the lowest response was on the strongly disagree option (5.55%).

Statement 6

I am comfortable teaching Sexual Education in a classroom with pregnant girls.

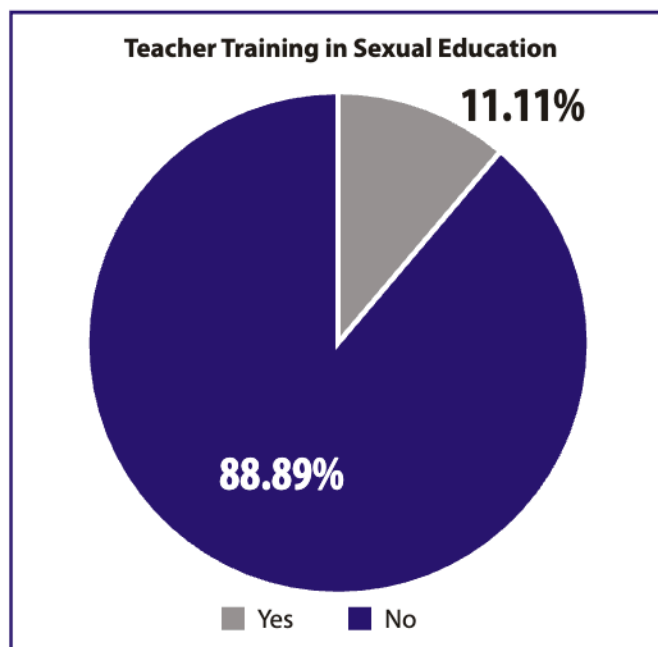


Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

The opinions of this statement were positive with the highest number of respondents answering that they agree (41.66%). It is interesting to note that the strongly disagree and strongly agree options had almost the same number of respondents. From these results we can conclude that attitudes toward young pregnant girls have changed and the focus is more on prevention from reoccurrence than the stigma of carrying a child at a young age.

Statement 7

Have you received training in teaching sexual education?

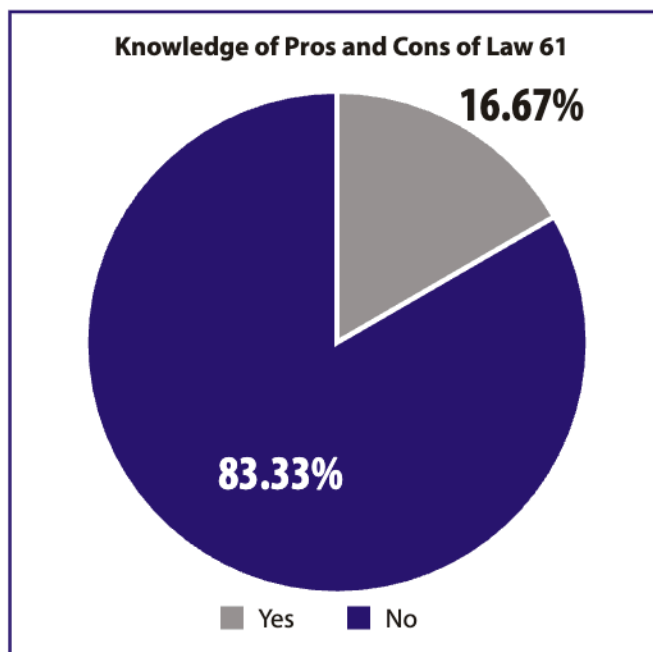


Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

According to the survey results, most respondents have not been trained in teaching sexual education (88.89%). The small portion that have (11.11%) could be doing so empirically or could have received training abroad.

Statement 8

Are you aware of the pros and cons of Law 61?



Source: Informed by Khemlani and Owens, 2019

The survey results indicate that the sample population in great part does not know about the pros and cons on Law 61. The high percentage of 83.33% reflects the need to educate teachers as a community in general so that they are aware of the implications of the proposed law and know how it could affect them in a classroom setting.

CONCLUSIONS

It is a hard challenge to try to find the best solution to teach Sexual Education especially in Panamanian schools. All studies require experts, preparation and analyses. The majority of youth learns about sexual matters from their friends. This means that they may not learn in the correct way. An unwanted pregnancy at a very young age leads to many negative consequences, including mental health, abortion, sexual transmitted diseases, economic problems, stigmatization, and hinders the full development of the young person.

By not teaching sexual education, the cycle of early pregnancies continues. This situation can have further reaching effects on the community. Young girls who become mothers might have lower chance of continuing their education and eventually have to drop out of school to because of not having a source of help.

The need for Sexual Education in order to identify and prevent the risk factors of an unwanted pregnancy during adolescence becomes increasingly clearer. In order to accomplish this purpose all segments of society should be convened. If the goal is educating, informing or, even better, forming, then the school stands out from among the other reference groups because this is its essential role.

"When students were asked about how sexuality education should be taught, they noted the need for trained teachers who (could) deliver more depth of information within lessons, more communication with teachers whereby you (could) go to them for information/support, and the need for confidentiality". (Cheetham, 2018)

RECOMMENDATIONS

A few basic principles should be established for the success of the educators' actions. Perhaps the most important one being not only to base sexual education on the use of preservatives and contraceptive methods, but rather on rescuing the individual as a result of his/her own actions. This favors the development of a sense of citizenship, respect, commitment, self-care and care for others.

BIBLIOGRAPHY REFERENCES

Arcia, J. (2018). Educación sexual: ¿Cómo enseñar a los jóvenes? *La Estrella de Panamá*.

BMJ. (2002). Limits of teacher delivered sex education: interim behavioural outcomes from randomised trial. *THE BMJ*.

Breuner, C. C. y Mattson, G. (2016). *Pediatrics*. Recuperado de American Academy of Pediatrics Web site: <http://www.aappublications.org/news>

Cheetham, N. (2018). *Review of Curricula and Curricular Frameworks*. Paris.

Kirby, D. (2010). The impact of schools and school programs upon adolescent sexual behavior. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 27-33.

Sexuality Education. Federal Center for Health Education (BZgA), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Health Organization (WHO).

Teaching Sex Education *Phi Delta Kappan - The Professional Journal for Educators* 1

