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### Original Article

## The perspective of high school students and counselors on teaching sexual issues and examining their convergence

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### Abstract

**Introduction:** Teaching sexual issues to students is one of the topics that requires discussion and examination due to cultural sensitivities. Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine the attitudes of students and counselors towards the necessity and content of sexual education.

**Materials and Methods:** This research constitutes a qualitative investigation employing a phenomenological approach. The sampling process was guided by the objectives of study and continued until data saturation was reached. The samples included 15 female students and 9 female counselors from high schools in Qaemshahr city-Iran. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, and the Morse content analysis method was utilized for data analysis.

**Results:** Throughout the study, six primary themes emerged, each encompassing both shared and unique sub-themes. The main themes included: 1) The imperative of delivering sexual education, 2) The sexual education requirements of young women, 3) Challenges in providing and receiving sexual education at home and school, 4) Appropriate sources of sexual information, 5) The suitable age for initiating sexual education, and 6) The pedagogical approach to addressing sexual matters.

**Conclusion:** The findings of this study indicate that both students and counselors assert that offering sexual education in a timely and appropriate manner can mitigate numerous potential harms and contribute to the well-being of adolescents. Taking into consideration the essential educational themes as perceived by students and counselors facilitates more effective planning in this domain.

**Keywords:** Counselors, Sexual education, Students

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### Introduction

Sexual education, a notably challenging field in many societies, including ours, has faced numerous obstacles due to ambiguities, misconceptions, and implementation barriers (1). Sexual concerns and activities

predominantly commence during adolescence (2), a phase marked by physical, social, cognitive, and emotional development. Adolescence is a key demographic for promoting sexual health education to nurture sustainable and equitable societies (3).

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Adolescents must navigate the consequences of harmful sexual behaviors, such as unintended pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections (4), and experiences with sexual violence (5,6). Although adolescents acknowledge the need for improved knowledge to build healthy relationships (7), they often lack sufficient information from parents or other formal sources, hindering the development of more positive and respectful sexual experiences (8). Delivering sexual education to this vulnerable group has proven difficult, as sex is commonly considered taboo, and parents frequently display reluctance to discuss these issues within the home environment (9). Sexual education can be conceptualized as a combination of learning experiences aimed at promoting voluntary behavior for sexual health (10). In terms of content, abstinence-only program advocates work to help young adults avoid unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases. Comprehensive approaches to sexual education go beyond addressing risky behaviors, incorporating additional essential aspects, such as love, relationships, pleasure, sexual desires, needs, gender diversity, and rights (11). Sexual education can take place in various environments. Schools play a crucial role in implementing sexual education and promoting adolescent sexual health (12); peer groups and parents can also serve as channels for information dissemination.

However, the Internet has become a significant source of information and guidance on these subjects (13). Adolescents' access to the Internet is nearly universal, with the widespread availability of digital platforms leading them to dedicate considerable time to online activities. Health-related information-seeking constitutes a primary purpose of internet usage (14). Concurrently, young individuals' extensive use of technology, facilitated by the ease of access, availability, affordability, and remote participation opportunities, presents intriguing prospects for sexual health education programs (15). These programs can either mitigate or exacerbate harm, depending on the presence of self-care knowledge. A review of existing research in this domain reveals that the least harmful education initiatives are those conducted within school settings (3). Over the years, there have been diverse and occasionally contradictory perspectives on examining sexual behavior in developing nations. Due to cultural constraints, introducing and implementing

sexual education in schools in these countries are not easily accepted, and parental discussions of sexual matters with their children are often viewed as uncommon (16). Although parents generally tend to respond to their children's inquiries, they frequently lack the necessary knowledge to address their curious questions (17). Additionally, mothers believe that necessary education should be provided. Still, there is disagreement regarding the appropriate age for imparting information and the appropriate individual to provide education (parents or teachers/counselors). A study was conducted in Mashhad-Iran to deeply understand mothers' experiences teaching sexual education to their daughters. The results showed that while some mothers felt competent in teaching sexual education, many raised the issue of a lack of information in this area and unawareness of proper methods of transferring data as reasons for advocating for a counselor as the appropriate individual for sexual education (18). Considering that the philosophy and foundations of education in Iran are based on the principles of Islam, researchers have mainly focused on examining various aspects of sexual education from an Islamic perspective. However, it should be noted that the current era is a time of globalization, and globalization has had a tremendous impact on all aspects of human life, particularly education, and training. The face of educational systems worldwide has changed, and traditional and common ideas about education and training, as well as educational tools and media, have quickly become obsolete and replaced by modern ideas and methods (1). Despite disagreements regarding the necessity of sexual education for children and adolescents, its content, and the need for increased parental awareness, a gap in understanding adolescents' perspectives as the main target audience for this education is felt. It seems that by examining the experienced needs and required content of the target audience of an educational program, it is possible to make decisions about the appropriate content, age of education, and the person providing information without guesswork and with greater confidence, resulting in better program design and implementation. Therefore, this study aimed to examine the necessity of sexual education and the required content from the perspective of high school students and to investigate the convergence of their views with those of school counselors, who potentially play a role as educators in this field.

## Materials and Methods

The research aimed to explore the perceptions of female students and counselors in high schools regarding sexual education and its required content through a qualitative phenomenological research approach. Qualitative research is a valuable method for obtaining in-depth and comprehensive information from participants, focusing on the totality of human experiences, and is therefore considered the most suitable approach for investigating human phenomena (19).

In a phenomenological study, the researcher collects data from individuals who have experienced a particular phenomenon and produces a composite description of the essence of that experience from the perspective of all participants. Phenomenology emphasizes the common aspects of individuals' experiences concerning a particular phenomenon. Thus, the primary goal of phenomenology is to reduce individuals' experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation to a fundamental and essential description (20).

The research population for this study comprised all female secondary school counselors and 11th and 12th-grade female students in Ghaemshahr city-Iran. The researchers utilized a purposeful sampling method to select participants. In this method, individuals are selected based on their rich knowledge of the phenomenon of interest and the objective of gathering information (21). This study aimed not to generalize the findings to the entire population but to obtain diverse experiences from individuals exposed to the research subject.

Therefore, several secondary schools in the theoretical, science, and art fields were selected, and interviews were conducted with school counselors and a number of students until saturation was reached. Saturation is achieved when no new data is added to the previous data, including recent cases or points.

The present study included 9 counselors and 15 students in the sample. To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, each participant was assigned a code number, and their real names were not mentioned in the research report. Moreover, the study objectives and participants' informed consent were obtained before conducting the interviews.

To gather data, semi-structured interviews were conducted, and the participants were encouraged to speak freely about their

experiences and opinions regarding sexual education. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data were analyzed using the Morse content analysis method, which systematically examines and interprets textual data to identify significant patterns, themes, and categories. The themes and sub-themes were identified through an inductive analysis process, in which the data was repeatedly read and coded. The categories were developed through comparisons and contrast between the codes, and the themes were derived from the types. To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the data analysis, member checking, peer review, and prolonged engagement were employed (22).

Additionally, the interview questions were developed based on the research questions, which aimed to explore the attitudes of students and counselors towards sexual education, the perceived barriers to providing/receiving sexual education, and suitable sources of sexual information. The interview questions were designed to encourage participants to share their experiences and perspectives regarding the phenomenon of interest. The interviews were recorded with the participant's permission and were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Overall, the semi-structured interviews provided a rich and in-depth understanding of the participant's experiences and attitudes toward sexual education.

Due to the sensitivity of the interview topic, as many individuals consider it a private domain, ethical commitments such as informed consent, the confidentiality of data, the right to withdraw at any time, and permission to record audio were confirmed in writing by the participants during the interviews. It is important to note that the questions were carefully crafted to encourage participants to provide detailed responses, and the interview process was conducted in a relaxed and non-judgmental manner to foster a comfortable environment for participants to express their experiences and perspectives. The interviews were conducted in Persian and were later transcribed and translated into English for data analysis. The data was analyzed using Morse's content analysis method, a rigorous and systematic approach involving identifying patterns and themes. The interviews were conducted by one of the researchers of the present study, and all interviews were audio-recorded and concurrently transcribed by the

researchers. The interviewer then reviewed the transcribed interviews to correct any errors. Interviews took place in the counseling rooms of the schools, and each interview lasted an average of 20 to 25 minutes. Participants were also allowed to follow up if they wished to provide further information about their experiences. Content analysis is a rigorous and systematic method for extracting meaningful patterns from qualitative data. In the Morse content analysis method, the researcher carefully listens to the interviews and reviews the written texts multiple times to identify important sections. These sections are then broken down into themes or contexts and compiled into subcategories based on their similarities in meaning and concept. The subcategories are then organized into categories through a reductive and inductive process. This process is repeated until the researcher achieves stability and satisfaction with the categories and subcategories. To ensure the credibility of the research analysis, the following methods were employed: (a) participant checking to verify and potentially correct codes and classifications - five participants were asked to provide feedback on our data interpretation and confirm

whether our interpretations reflected their experiences or not; (b) ensuring maximum variation of sampling, conducting simultaneous data analysis and feedback for research completion, and allocating sufficient and appropriate time for data collection.

**Results**

It's worth noting that the standard deviation of the age range of the counselors is incorrect, as it is the same as the average age. However, the information provided regarding the age and educational background of the participants is useful in understanding the sample characteristics of the study.

Through qualitative interviews with counselors and students, six primary themes regarding sexual education emerged: the necessity of providing sexual education, the sexual education needs of girls, barriers to providing or receiving sexual education at home and school, appropriate sources of sexual information, the appropriate age to begin sexual education, and the method of providing sexual education. Each of these themes was further categorized and divided into subcategories, as illustrated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Themes, categories, and subcategories of students' and counselors' attitudes towards sexual education

The attitude of counselors and students towards sexual education															
Necessity of sexual education		The sexual education needs of girls				Obstacles to sexual education at home and school		Suitable sources for providing sexual education information			Appropriate age for sexual education		Methods for providing sexual education		
Common Themes	Uncommon themes	Common Themes	Uncommon themes	Common themes	Uncommon themes	Common themes	Uncommon themes	Common themes	Uncommon themes	Common themes	Uncommon themes	Common themes	Uncommon themes		
The Importance of Awareness	Gathering Information from peers and the virtual space	Counselor	Student	Life skills	Counselor	Student	False modesty and concealment	Counselor	Student	Family	Student	Secondary school	Counselor	Student	Workshop with instructional video clips
	Increasing relationships between girls and boys	Natural needs of adolescence	Privacy and self-care	Religious doctrines	Homosexuality	Lack of coordination between home and school	Parental ignorance	Prematurity	Counselor	Internet	Primary school	Before entering elementary school	At the time of marriage	Handouts and textbooks	
			Maturity	Increasing family awareness	Characteristics of the opposite gender		Lack of understanding of children	Fear of negative judgment	Conscious and Confident Individual						Individual counseling
			Principles, hygiene, and risks of sexual relationships	Controlling Sexual Needs during the Singlehood Period		General policies of education and training	Completeness of information								
			Masturbation and its harms	Referral centers in case of harm		Concerns about provocation or suppression	Lack of information among parents and counselors								
				Pregnancy											

*The necessity of sexual education:* All participants, including counselors and students, universally recognized the significance of sexual education, owing to the prevalence of inaccurate information among peers and on the Internet. They also pointed out that providing correct information could assist in establishing healthy relationships for those who intend to get married early. "It's essential for married individuals, not for singles. Singles only need to be aware of how to avoid deception by boys" (11th-grade student).

Participants also emphasized that sexual education is crucial in raising awareness and minimizing harm. "The days of telling us not to do certain things or not to associate with boys have passed. Most kids have boyfriends or girlfriends. We must recognize that information reaches us in different ways. Therefore, it is better for trustworthy individuals to impart this knowledge to children" (11th-grade student). "If adolescents have knowledge, they will not harm themselves or, at the very least, know where to seek help when confronted with a problem" (12th-grade student).

Moreover, counselors highlighted that the increasing interaction between boys and girls is another critical reason necessitating sexual education. "A student approached me and said, 'Don't tell me it's wrong to be friends with boys; I'm in a relationship now. Tell me how not to get hurt'; and there are numerous students in this predicament" (49-year-old counselor with 25 years of counseling experience). Students also affirmed that acquiring information regarding sexual education is a natural need during their developmental stage. "Due to hormonal changes in adolescence, it's natural for us to be curious about these issues, and we have the right to access this knowledge" (11th-grade student).

*Sexual education needs of girls:* Figure 1 illustrates the six main themes that emerged from the interviews with counselors and students: the necessity of providing sexual education, the sexual education needs of girls, barriers to providing/receiving sexual education at home and school, appropriate sources of sexual information, the appropriate age to start sexual education, and the manner in which sex education is provided.

The similarities between the needs expressed by both groups were highlighted, particularly regarding the importance of life skills education to enable students to face sexual challenges

more appropriately. However, there were a few needs expressed by students that were not being met by the existing educational programs, including discussing the characteristics and conditions of puberty in the opposite sex and providing information on who or which centers to consult in case of harm.

Additionally, raising awareness among families and organizing educational classes for them were also proposed as needs for sexual education.

*Obstacles to sexual education at home and school:* Another common barrier mentioned by both groups was the lack of adequate training and knowledge among counselors and teachers in providing sexual education.

Many counselors expressed a need for more training in this area. For example, a 42-year-old counselor with 18 years of experience said, "In my opinion, counselors should be trained in this field; sexual issues are widespread among adolescents, and it's our responsibility to provide appropriate responses to their questions." Similarly, students emphasized the need for teachers to be well-informed about sexual education and to be able to address their questions confidently.

One 12th-grade student stated, "The teacher must be someone who knows what they're talking about and can answer our questions correctly; otherwise, we won't trust them." Finally, the taboo nature of sexual education was mentioned as a significant barrier by both groups. A 31-year-old counselor with eight years of experience stated, "In our culture, it's difficult to talk about sexual issues, and many people consider it a taboo subject; this has made it hard to provide sexual education to students."

Furthermore, counselors mentioned the lack of proper teacher training in sexual education. One counselor (43 years old with 17 years of counseling experience) stated, "Teachers are also hesitant to discuss sexual issues with students because they are not trained or prepared for this task.

They fear providing incorrect information, and they are also afraid of being judged by parents." Another barrier identified by students was a lack of confidentiality and privacy during counseling sessions, which makes them reluctant to discuss sensitive issues with counselors. "Sometimes I want to share personal issues with the counselor, but I am afraid that my classmates will find out. It's embarrassing," said a 12th-grade student.

Moreover, students mentioned that they face some restrictions regarding their access to information on sexual matters. "Internet filters in schools block some of the information we need, and we can't access them.

For example, the name of the website itself might be blocked, so we can't even search for it," said an 11th-grade student. Similarly, some counselors mentioned that school officials prohibit the discussion of sexual matters in the school environment, which hinders their ability to provide sexual education to students. In addition, cultural and religious values were also noted as a barrier by some participants.

One counselor (38 years old with 12 years of counseling experience) stated, "In our culture, discussing sexual matters is considered taboo, and religious issues are often mixed up with sexual issues. Some parents believe that talking about sex is immoral and can lead to deviant behavior among children."

Students pointed out that parents and counselors lack adequate information, believing that they would face challenges in answering students' questions or sometimes think that students have already obtained sufficient information from various sources and do not need involvement.

Premature concerns and fear of negative judgment were also among the other obstacles to sexual education from the students' perspective; "They think it's too early for us, but it's not really because we know a lot earlier than parents think. If they are comfortable giving us information, we will feel comfortable asking questions." (A twelfth-grade student), "I'm afraid they'll think badly of me, assume I'm in a relationship with a boy, or say it's too early and inappropriate for me to ask about these things." (An eleventh-grade student).

*Appropriate sources for providing sexual information:* Both students and counselors pointed to family, counselors, and trustworthy, knowledgeable individuals in the family or school with whom students have a close and comfortable relationship as safe and informed sources for providing information on sexual matters. The Internet was also mentioned by students; "The internet is convenient; we don't feel embarrassed, don't stutter, and can find answers to any question." (A twelfth-grade student).

*Appropriate age for sexual education:* Students and counselors admitted that currently, the exchange of information about

sexual relationships even occurs at the primary level, and instances of interaction between girls and boys have been observed at this level. Therefore, high school is too late for sexual education.

Counselors generally stated that familiarity with concepts such as personal boundaries and self-care should begin in the years before entering primary school and gradually progress according to the needs of each age group. Most students considered early middle school an appropriate time for sexual education since the majority of discussions and acquisition of information about sexual matters for girls occur at this age. Some students believed that the appropriate time for sexual education was at the time of marriage.

*The methodology of sexual education:* Both students and counselors have emphasized the importance of organizing educational workshops, utilizing a team composed of experts from various fields, such as psychologists, sociologists, and physicians. This approach ensures the transfer of useful information to students.

Some have also mentioned the use of written materials and individual counseling for those not comfortable with the subject or the provision of more detailed information for those requiring it. For example, one eleventh-grade student stated: "Using workshops and films is very helpful, and the students will surely welcome it.

However, for someone like me who finds it difficult and cannot ask such questions in a group setting, the existence of books, notes, or the possibility of individual counseling is more helpful." As evident from Figure 1 and the above explanations, both counselors and students hold positive attitudes toward sexual education for students. Despite the shared concepts that both groups have mentioned, there are differences in their perspectives on this topic, which are detailed in Table 1.

## Discussion

The present study aimed to investigate the attitudes of high school students towards sexual education and its convergence with the attitudes of school counselors. While various studies have examined the attitudes of parents, teachers, and counselors regarding sexual education (3,7,12), the attitudes of adolescents and children, who are the primary recipients of this education, have been neglected.

It is evident that if a needs assessment is conducted in the design and implementation of any educational program, the designed program will be richer and more successful. Undoubtedly, hearing adolescents' thoughts, who are naturally faced with questions, information, and sometimes experiences regarding sexual matters due to their age, provides valuable information to researchers, relevant experts, program designers, and parents. This was the experience of the researchers in the present study.

One of the important themes of the interviews was the necessity of sexual education. As seen in Figure 1, counselors and students pointed to the widespread information available through the Internet, the sometimes-irreparable harm resulting from the lack of adolescents' awareness, and the early marriages of some students. Interestingly, students considered sexual education their right, allowing them to obtain the necessary information from reliable sources based on their age's natural needs. Another noteworthy point in the theme of the necessity of sexual education was that although both counselors and students mentioned the importance of awareness, their emphasis differed. Students regarded the lack of awareness as the cause of harm, while counselors considered having awareness as a means to a healthy life. In other words, counselors saw awareness as a factor in preventing the establishment of relationships. In contrast, students perceived it as a factor in establishing healthy and harmless relationships with the opposite sex.

As they mentioned in their conversations, having awareness helps them know what to do in case of a problem.

While in a previous study, issues related to puberty and menstruation were the primary focus of mothers of adolescent girls when discussing sexual matters with their daughters, the current research shows that another significant concern for adolescent girls is their relationship with the opposite sex, its consequences, and potential harm (18). This finding is consistent with the definitions provided for sexual education, which includes basic information about sexual relations, reproductive health, the correct use of contraceptive methods, and awareness of abortion (10,11).

Among the significant findings of the present study is that both students and counselors

believed that teaching sexual matters to girls during the second level of middle school was too late, as they thought that information on this subject, whether correct or incorrect, takes shape in girls' minds much earlier. Therefore, providing accurate information at the appropriate time significantly aids adolescent health and family well-being. The majority of students considered the first level of middle school suitable for discussing issues related to sexual relationships. At the same time, counselors suggested elementary school or even earlier as an opportune time to commence education on self-care and personal boundaries. While some studies have investigated the feasibility of teaching topics related to puberty and sexual health, the present study demonstrated that students, in addition to the fundamentals of sexual relationships, emphasized subjects such as homosexuality, masturbation, and its potential harm, sexual desire control, self-care, establishing non-harmful communication, recognizing the opposite sex's characteristics, and understanding the conditions of their puberty.

Consistent with some previous research, the findings of this study also showed that although there is a more accommodating environment today for discussing sexual matters and inviting experts into schools compared to the past, insufficient knowledge among parents in this area and the lack of coordination between home and school remain primary obstacles to sexual education.

Counselors expressed concerns that, on the one hand, families might object to the content discussed in schools, and on the other hand, many parents might not be able to answer their children's questions on this subject. Among the other barriers to sexual education are various concerns held by parents, counselors, and even students. While some counselors worried about providing information beyond students' needs, students stated, "Our knowledge of sexual matters is usually far greater than what our parents or counselors think; therefore, it would be better if we received this information from reliable sources such as parents, counselors, or experts at the appropriate time." Interestingly, some students mentioned that "the extent of our inquiries depends on how comfortable our parents, teachers, or counselors are in providing this information." Consequently, the reaction of these reliable sources, such as parents or counselors, is a contributing factor to students'

concerns, which discourages them from asking questions and leads them to seek unreliable sources such as peer groups and the Internet. Notably, even during interviews, some counselors in the present study were not at ease. For the success of an educational program, it is crucial to deliver the instruction in a manner that garners the interest and reception of the learners.

Both students and counselors agreed on the importance of group question-and-answer sessions with the presence of an expert, organizing workshops and classes, utilizing educational films and clips, and inviting a team composed of psychologists, sociologists, and physicians to provide comprehensive information. They emphasized that textbooks and handouts were not their primary focus. However, some individuals mentioned the usefulness of written materials alongside classes and workshops for those students who are not comfortable with the subject matter and, for various reasons, cannot raise their questions.

Additionally, counselors pointed out that allocating specific consultation hours in the weekly schedule would facilitate communication between school counselors and students, better identify students' needs, and enable more effective planning for providing useful information. Currently, the only time to consult with a counselor is during the breaks between classes, when students prefer to rest and prepare for their next class.

Alternatively, counselors must allocate time from academic classes, which other teachers do not favor.

Alongside the common concepts that both groups of counselors and students referred to, such as the necessity of teaching sexual issues at the appropriate time by knowledgeable individuals, the existence of different concepts, particularly in the subjects of educational needs and barriers to education, highlights the importance of examining the topic of sexual education from the perspective of the primary recipients of this education.

Factors contributing to the differing perceived needs among students and counselors include cultural and societal developments and generational differences. These developments demand heightened attention from parents, counselors, and, on a broader scale, educational planners, who must adapt themselves accordingly; otherwise, even if efforts are made

to teach sexual issues to students, the lack of alignment with the perceived needs of the audience will not yield the expected outcomes and consequences.

The differences in the perspectives of counselors and students regarding the barriers to sexual education emphasize the need to raise awareness among parents and even counselors and strive to change attitudes towards this subject. This shift in attitude will inevitably occur over time as a result of societal changes, but leaving such an essential topic to the passage of time is unwise.

By changing attitudes in a timely manner, it is possible to prevent many individual and societal harms, and prevention is certainly better than cure.

In summary, addressing any phenomenon appropriately requires awareness, which is not an exception for sexual issues in our society, considering the current cultural, societal, and media developments. When credible sources take responsibility for providing suitable information for each age group, individuals will be better equipped and healthier in facing questions, challenges, and even incorrect or incomplete information and will make more appropriate choices.

Thus, it is essential to pay special attention to empowering families, as they are the primary environment for growth. If children are properly informed about age-appropriate issues within the family environment, formal education will be better equipped to fulfill its complementary role.

Any research may face limitations from design to implementation, knowledge of which could be helpful to other researchers.

Due to the sensitivity of the research topic and reasons that may be related to cultural issues, some counselors and students did not feel comfortable during the interviews, leading to less comprehensive responses to certain questions. Conducting interviews on these subjects in informal settings might elicit richer responses.

## Conclusion

The findings of the present research demonstrate that both counselors and students jointly believe that, considering the nature of age-specific characteristics and the volume of information available from various sources, such as the Internet and peers, access to information related to sexual matters is inevitably available,



which may be incomplete or erroneous. Therefore, providing the necessary information at the appropriate time by knowledgeable and reliable individuals, such as parents, teachers, counselors, and relevant experts, can be a significant preventative factor for potential harm, formation of a healthy perception of sexual relationships and their principles, and receiving appropriate assistance and services in case of any damage. Furthermore, to achieve proper education, it is essential to design and implement programs to enhance the capabilities and awareness of families and school counselors. Investigating parents' attitudes

alongside those of students and counselors can provide a clearer picture of the challenges of sexual education in our country, which we hope will be considered by interested researchers in this field.

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