

“You Cannot Escape”: Children Working with Children for Sexuality Education

Parul Malik, PhD (Independent Scholar)
parulmalik0@yahoo.co.in

A Usual Kind of Trauma?

A man followed seventeen-year-old Kasak¹ through an alley close to her house in New Delhi. She turned around to find him masturbating at an arm’s length, targeting her. Stunned for a moment, she soon made sense of his act of perversion and ran, not immediately knowing if screaming or fighting would help. The incident left Kasak feeling traumatized.

When she decided to share it with her parents, she felt betrayed at being put under surveillance, handed instructions to dress down, and not step out alone. What was more disturbing was that she discovered her peers did not know what masturbation meant or could not distinguish between penis and anus or urethra and vagina. They watched pornography and believed real-life bodies and sexual expressions are supposed to be like that. They were sexually harassed on the streets, on public transport, even at school, and did not know to whom to report it, or did not have the language to express themselves. Her teachers, meanwhile, did not consider her requests to conduct sex education. Let down but determined, she penned a moving poem for a newspaper titled “You Cannot Escape”:

Yes, I would cover my body/...Not smile or laugh or play like boys./...My friend who followed your rules, got raped./ Hair tied or not,/ Skirt tight or not,/ You’ll still want to rape./ But I’m no longer afraid...You won’t be spared now./ You cannot escape

Kasak was my student in 2011-12. When I began my fieldwork at her school – a co-educational private school attended by middle-class students – in 2015 for a doctoral study about sexuality education, the sexual assault incident described above had recently happened. She confided in me how it had altered her sense of self, personal relationships, and outlook towards strangers, especially men.

Whose Voice, Whose Agency?

Drawing on Critical Pedagogy (Freire 2005), my research was guided by the Critical Sexuality Education framework (Bay-Cheng 2017; Sanjakdar et al. 2015) which seeks to make deeper socio-cultural, political and contextualized engagements with ideas pertaining to gender, bodies, violence, sexual and reproductive health. I employed participatory research (Kellett 2011; Siry 2015) and peer education methods (Ashcraft 2012; Rampal 2008) to research *with* children so that their voice and agency, experiences, questions, and curiosities were at the heart of research and knowledge co-construction. This paper demonstrates a method of peer education that draws on the critical agency of learners by building cross-age “Circles of Learning” (CoL) (Rampal

2008), wherein older children volunteer to engage and educate younger children and deepen their own understanding of sexuality in the process.

My understanding of children as participants and co-researchers emanated from anthropological and sociological work which lend children a bigger social role – as actors who exercise their agency to influence their own lives and societies (Alderson 2008; Milstein 2010). This body of work extends the discourses on childhood in studies on education in two ways. One is the manner in which contemporary childhood research recovers “childhood” as socially constructed and as warranting meaningful engagement in its own right. Children are studied as individuals, rather than adults in the making, who have a voice and inhabit distinct social relationships and cultures (James and Prout 2005). The other is by challenging the rhetoric of “giving voice to children” (James 2007). This addresses the politics of representation and power differential in the researcher-researched relationship, brings forth authentic data, highlights divergent experiences, and, significantly, prioritizes children’s participation.

Building consensus to educate children about sexuality, however, was the bigger challenge, for adults often perpetuate the discourse of protection of childhood sexual innocence, where sex is the symbolic marker of the end of childhood and beginning of adulthood (Allen 2011). Children and adolescents like Kasak are systematically denied opportunities by their parents, teachers, and India’s policy on sexuality education to learn about their bodies, emotions, interpersonal relationships, gender inequity, or violence. School education, then, does not represent their lived realities, or prepare them for participation in social life. Alternatively, I illustrate below through one example how the older children and I listened to the younger children at Kasak’s school and worked around their priorities during this study.

Learning Together

Three girls and two boys amongst Kasak’s peers from Class XII volunteered to initiate CoL sessions. We met thrice a week for one month for one-two hours in their free time to have extensive discussions about their lived experiences of sexuality, critically engage with relevant print and multimedia materials, and subsequently, plan the sessions for their juniors.

Students challenged conventionally held beliefs and patterns of conducting sexuality sessions during these meetings. The seniors, through constant reminiscing and retrospection, decided to cover “bold” topics to benefit their juniors, such as menstruation, genitals, masturbation, contraception, pornography, sexism, gender-based violence, etc., in a mixed-gender set-up. Discussion of such topics had been unheard of! They conducted and I facilitated two seventy- to eighty-minute sessions with forty-two students of one section of Class IX, most of whom were 15-years old. We used slide presentations, group discussions, video clips and activities. Though initially jittery, the students soon secured the undivided attention of their juniors, who in turn were fearlessly drawn into “candid, emotionally safe conversations” (Bay-Cheng 2017, 351). Some juniors openly made queries, and some asked on chits of paper questions such as: “Do we lose our virginity by masturbation?”, “ways to prevent nightfall?”, “What are tampons?”, “How can I make my breasts bigger?”. We also got queries about sexting, how someone’s “virginity” can be “tested”, and what happens if a peer they were once romantically involved with has their nude photos. As Kasak related her experience of the man in the alley, numerous others shared

detailed accounts of witnessing similar men close to their houses, on the roadsides or even outside the school. The juniors wanted to know how to deal with an abusive tutor or a neighbor who blackmails them, or how to call out harassment on public transport. Children's participation in this intervention, inspired by their lived experiences, enabled a form of education that not only prepares them for life, but is life itself (Beane and Apple 2013).

Nurturing Children's Agency

The juniors sincerely expressed their desire for the seniors to visit and conduct more sessions with them in the future. We extended the CoL so that the ninth-graders subsequently conducted a session with the eighth-graders. The senior students who conducted the sexuality education sessions not only understood sexuality better, but also felt more confident managing their relationships and bodily choices, and negotiating gender norms. They were greatly admired at school and were sought after by other students requesting them to conduct sessions with them. Interestingly, rather than depending on teachers, the children themselves felt motivated and confident to work with each other towards a "pedagogy of empathy" (Rampal and Mander 2013). Drawing on their own struggles enabled the students to develop their agency in critically engaging ways around complex issues of sexuality.

Emphasis on children's voice and agency, their ownership over the research process and active participation in the construction of knowledge present pedagogical and research alternatives (Malik 2022), which push back on the "silences created by marginalisation and underrepresentation of participants" (Siry 2015, 153). As Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) emphasize, the value of participatory research lies in creating "knowledge for action" and transformative possibilities (1667). To this effect, my fieldwork ended with a sense of heartening and dramatic conclusiveness. During this time, Kasak spotted her "flashing" tormentor and decided to report him to the police. She fearlessly filed a complaint against him, mobilized her family to support her decision, attended court dates and ensured the man received prison time. She shared with me that the experience of closely working with sexuality, including understanding the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 which defines masturbation as a punishable offence, and mentoring her juniors empowered her with the sense of courage and responsibility to stand up for herself. The man could indeed not escape! Note: Researching sexuality with children is a sensitive theme in the Indian context. However, the principal of the school where I conducted my fieldwork very encouragingly permitted me to work with the students. I followed ethical practices in terms of taking informed consent from all participants, matters of their privacy, safety and others.

Endnotes

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

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Author contact: Parul Malik, PhD (Independent Scholar), parulmalik0@yahoo.co.in

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