The Backlash against Sex Education and HIV/AIDS issues

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Current situations
Suppose children in elementary, junior high, or high schools were infected with HIV. They would not know about their infection during childhood because it would take more than 8 years to develop AIDS. However, according to statistics from the ministry of Health, the number of those in the 20-30 age group infected with HIV is the highest (42.6%) among all ages, which means that these young people with HIV would have been infected through sexual intercourse in their teens. In this sense, AIDS has become a “youth disease” that is also affecting high school students.

As AIDS has a long incubation period and even people developing AIDS do not notice symptoms at early stages, there is always a high risk of spreading HIV unknowingly. Therefore, it is crucial to talk about HIV/AIDS issues in sex education at schools. In fact, teenage abortion is increasing (13%) due to unexpected pregnancy, and Chlamydia among sexual transmitted infections (STIs) is spreading drastically among teenagers. These data show that teenagers tend not to use condoms, which is enough to suggest that there is a possibility of HIV spreading amongst teenagers.

Basic issues of HIV/AIDS education
We tend to hold an image of HIV/AIDS as more of a blood transfusion disease than an STI because the Japanese media reported most HIV/AIDS cases from hemophilia patients who contracted the HIV virus via blood products (which they were recommended to take by the government and pharmaceutical corporations). Therefore, there was little “prevention education” for HIV/AIDS as a sexual transmitted infection at schools. Sex education does not deal only HIV/AIDS, but also other STIs, such as the above-mentioned Chlamydia, at schools.

Sex education also teaches a medical explanation of HIV, including scientific descriptions of virus, infection routes, and the biological organization of blood. It also discusses the human rights issues of people living with HIV/AIDS, and that the discrimination against people with HIV/AIDS should not be tolerated, as the disease cannot be contracted throughout daily life. However, despite sex education, HIV is increasing. Assuming that HIV is spread through sexual activity, we can conclude that the current sex education is not effective in preventing HIV infections. As a result, even high-school students consider condoms not as a tool for protecting their lives, but only as contraception. It is crucial to raise their awareness (although contraceptive education is not enough.)

The reality surrounding the sexuality of children and youth is getting more serious than ever in Japan. An overwhelming amount of sexual information is invading their daily
lives. In addition, manipulative seduction exploiting the sexuality of children and youth is everywhere. These situations are accelerated by highly advanced information and communication technology such as cell phones and Internet communication. On the other hand, human relationships, including family members, are being getting attenuated. In such an environment, children are living in isolation and are easily allured. In fact, children are facing many sexual problems including unexpected pregnancy, abortion, and STIs, which have increased since the mid-1990s. For healthy development and growth of sexuality of children and youth, it is important to educate them about sexuality as early as elementary school.

**Backlash against sex education**

As I illustrated above, we need sex education for children and youth more than ever. Currently, our society is replete with sex-saturated information that makes fun of, exploits, and ridicules women’s sexuality.

However, recently the backlash against sex education has intensified. The beginning of the backlash began with a discussion over a controversial booklet of sex education made by the National Institute of Maternal and Child Health, governed by the ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. The booklet was planned for distribution to junior high schools nationwide. The booklet opened up debates in the Diet when a congresswoman, at the Committee on Education, pointed out that the booklet introduces child contraceptive pills and encourages them to become sexually active. The Minister of Health, Labor, and Welfare was asked to explain the booklet and was almost manipulated into making a critical comment. As a result, the distributed booklets were collected and have since never been distributed.

There were similar incidents at the Tokyo local government and other regional governments. Insisting that there are claims from residents or parents, some politicians
distort the contents of sex education class, exaggerate it, and made it a big deal at the assemblies or councils. Then, a certain newspaper company made an article with a shocking headline (sometimes there is a case in a reverse order than it was covered, and politicians make it a big deal). The last step is that the assembly would make a board of education promise to investigate the schools and manipulate then into making a critical comment on sex education. The assembly members sometimes even go to schools to confiscate the teaching materials and ask some hard questions to teachers and pressure them into canceling classes. This is how administrative power interferes with sex education.

One case of an extreme attack on sex education was against a public school for disabled children in Tokyo. The curriculum had been carefully designed by teachers over time and was highly respected by guardians and other interested parties. However, by only reading a report that appeared in a sex education magazine, the administrative power judged and attacked the school without observing the class or hearing from students. The curriculum, which was time-tested at the school and was supported by teachers and guardians, faced suspension as it was claimed to be out of the ministry’s curriculum guidelines. Within the curriculum, the administrative power is strongly opposed to the use of words like “genitals” and “sexual intercourse.” Also, they are against curricula that teach about condoms at the junior high school level. Interference in sex education practices is spreading widely throughout all schools in Japan.

What is the background of this backlash?

What has invoked the backlash against sex education in this era? It is very important to pay attention to who is interfering with sex education. They are the scholars and politicians who criticize the concept of gender-equal education and attack the idea of non-traditional “gender roles” for women and men. These are the same people who compel to praise the national flag and anthem (editor’s note: there is a strong opposition to the Japanese national flag and anthem because they are a symbol of military aggression and invasions by Japan’s Military during WWII). These are the same people who reform the history of Nanjing Massacre or “comfort women” in our history textbooks.

Besides, there is another factor to address that may be affecting the issue. In the US, the government has been budgeting for the promotion of abstinence-only sex education since president Bush came to power. Taking the views of Christian fundamentalism, the Bush administration is promoting anti-premarital sex, anti-abortion, and anti-gay marriage. Moreover, he is even trying to amend the constitution to reflect fundamental Christian viewpoints. Bush’s much-publicized abstinence-only sex education must be affecting the current backlash against sex education in Japan.

We have to remember that the recent fervent attacks against sex education in Japan have nothing to do with the improvement of the curriculum for the healthy development of children, but everything to do with a political agenda.

How should HIV/AIDS education be?

The current backlash against sex education is targeting elementary schools and schools for disabled children. However, there is a possibility that junior high and high schools will be the next target. In that case, it is crucial for us to consider how we treat the sexual activities of high school students and
how we can teach them about sexuality. Following the US, there is a claim that we should only teach abstinence to high school students.

The abstinence-only education is an enforcement of prohibition. It is impossible to teach how to use condoms and how to avoid pregnancy and STIs. Considering the current situation surrounding children and youth, abstinence-only education is unrealistic and ineffective in terms of education. Moreover, it will jeopardize children.

What we need to do is logically criticize the abstinence-only education and its conservative movement. In addition, we have to provide children with enough appropriate information and nurture their ability to make their own decisions, including whether they want to participate in sexual activity. That is the nature of education. At the same time, HIV/AIDS should not be treated only as an educational issue but also a public health issue. Therefore, we need to network with people in the medical and social-welfare fields in order to improve and solve these issues.

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Notes:
1 The AIDS Trend Committee, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (June 2001).
2 The Maternal Protection Statistics, the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (2000). Among total number of abortions (341,146), 13% (44,477 cases) was under 20 years old. The ratio is increasing.