PROCEEDINGS
Kalijaga International Conference on Education 2026
Faculty of Tarbiyah and Teacher Training, UIN Sunan Kalijaga
Innovation Toward Education: Shaping the Future of Learning
15 September 2026 | Convention Hall, UIN Sunan Kalijaga, Yogyakarta

CONFERENCE PAPER • KICE 2026 • YOGYAKARTA, INDONESIA

Perception of Gen Z Early Childhood Education Teachers Candidates About Early Childhood Sex Education

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Proceedings of the Kalijaga International Conference on Education 2026

Abstract. This study aims to explore and understand in depth the perceptions of Generation Z pre-service early childhood education (PAUD) teachers toward early childhood sexuality education, including its meaning, their attitudes, readiness, and the challenges they perceive in implementing it in early childhood education settings. The study focuses on how Generation Z experiences, values, and digital literacy influence their views on the urgency and limitations of early childhood sexuality education. The study used a qualitative approach with a narrative inquiry design. The participants were male and female Generation Z pre-service PAUD teachers. Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, including data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing. The findings show that prospective Generation Z PAUD teachers generally view early childhood sexuality education as an important preventive measure, but still face conceptual uncertainty, pedagogical limitations, and concerns about socio-cultural resistance. The study recommends strengthening PAUD curricula and pre-service teacher education so that sexuality education is more comprehensive, contextual, and culturally sensitive.

Keywords: prospective PAUD teachers; Generation Z; narrative inquiry; sexuality education; perception

INTRODUCTION

Sex education for early childhood is important to introduce from an early age so that children feel valued and protected [6]. It can begin by introducing the correct names of body parts rather than euphemisms, helping children understand their bodies and develop responsibility for caring for them [2]. Evidence-informed international guidance likewise emphasizes age-appropriate, developmentally responsive sexuality education that supports health, safety, dignity, and respectful relationships [11], [12].

Early childhood is a developmental period in which children increasingly distinguish body parts, privacy, gender categories, and social boundaries. Children's questions about their bodies therefore require calm, non-shaming, developmentally appropriate guidance rather than adult-oriented sexual content. Parents and educators can support this process by providing accurate information at a level matched to children's needs [11], [12], [31].

Children's curiosity about their bodies can generate questions that adults may find sensitive. The educational priority is to respond without shaming the child, while reinforcing bodily autonomy, privacy, safety, and appropriate boundaries. This framing also reduces the risk that children seek answers from unreliable sources and provides language they can use to communicate discomfort or inappropriate contact [11], [15], [31].

Classical psychosexual theory describes oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital phases of development. In early childhood education, the practical implication is not to teach this theoretical sequence to children, but to recognize that children's curiosity and understanding change across development and that explanations should remain age appropriate [6].

The National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement recommends beginning age-appropriate conversations about sexuality and relationships in early childhood as children start to notice bodies, gender, and interpersonal boundaries [31]. Children should receive accurate sexuality education early enough to support healthy behavior and protection from abuse [5]. Official child-protection guidance in Indonesia similarly stresses body knowledge, privacy, reproductive health, preparation for puberty, and prevention of sexual risk [32].

Even school-age children can show uneven understanding and attitudes regarding child sexual abuse, indicating the continuing need for developmentally appropriate adult guidance [3]. This concern is

particularly relevant in the Special Region of Yogyakarta, where official 2024 child-violence data show a substantial number of sexual-violence cases.

Table 1. Total Violence Against Children by Type of Violence Experienced (2024)

No	Coverage	Physical	Psychol.	Sexual	Exploitation	Human Trafficking	Neglect	Other
1	Kulon Progo Regency	10	14	17	0	1	3	4
2	Bantul Regency	47	23	65	2	0	6	13
3	Gunungkidul Regency	11	35	69	0	0	0	0
4	Sleman Regency	59	60	73	0	0	7	4
5	Yogyakarta City	18	46	56	2	0	1	2
	Total	145	178	280	4	1	17	23

Source: SIGA / Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Child Protection [33].

As shown in Table 1, child sexual violence in the Special Region of Yogyakarta reached 280 reported cases in 2024, exceeding the other listed violence categories in the same official dataset [33]. The figure underscores the continuing need for preventive child-protection education in both family and educational settings.

Sexual violence against children cannot be controlled solely through school or family supervision because risks can arise across multiple environments. One preventive strategy is to equip children with age-appropriate knowledge about their bodies, privacy, boundaries, and how to seek help [11], [15], [17].

Teachers also face practical barriers. They may be uncertain about how to discuss sexuality, feel psychologically unprepared or uncomfortable, lack adequate training and learning media, or worry about negative reactions from parents and communities. Research on early childhood education further shows that teachers' interpretations of children's behavior are shaped by interconnected school, family, and social environments, reinforcing the need for contextual professional preparation [1].

Prospective PAUD teachers therefore need preparation before entering professional practice. Generation Z pre-service teachers are generally familiar with digital environments, but digital familiarity does not automatically translate into pedagogical readiness [23]. Strengthening digital competence, interpersonal communication, and developmentally appropriate pedagogy is important for future teachers [4], [24], [25]. Sexuality education knowledge can help prospective teachers provide accurate, child-friendly guidance on body boundaries, hygiene, respect, and protection.

METHODS

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to describe in depth the perceptions of Generation Z pre-service early childhood education (PAUD) teachers regarding early childhood sexuality education. Qualitative description is appropriate when researchers seek accounts that remain close to participants' views and experiences [26], [27]. Participants were PAUD students aged approximately 19–21 years and were selected purposively according to criteria relevant to the research objectives [28]. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews covering understanding of children's psychosexual development, correct body terms, explanations of birth, challenges for early childhood teachers, the roles of parents and teachers, prevention of sexual abuse, bodily privacy, and readiness to provide sexuality education. Narrative responses were analyzed thematically to identify, organize, and interpret recurring themes [29]. The analytic process also followed data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification [30]. Trustworthiness was strengthened through repeated reading, thematic grouping, comparison across responses, and the use of direct quotations as empirical evidence. Participant identities were protected using anonymous labels, and quotations were reported consistently using standardized scholarly conventions [8].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Based on semi-structured interviews using an open-ended questionnaire, it was revealed that prospective early childhood education teachers (PAUD) Gen Z view early childhood sexuality education as an important part of self-protection education. Sexuality education is not understood as teaching about

sexual activity, but as a process of introducing children to their bodies, private parts, limits on touch, how to protect themselves, and the courage to say "no" and report to a trusted adult. This indicates that most prospective PAUD teachers have a positive perception of early childhood sexuality education, although their levels of conceptual understanding and pedagogical readiness vary.

The first finding shows that the understanding of prospective Gen Z PAUD teachers regarding children's psychosexual development is still uneven. Some respondents were able to explain the stages of psychosexual development according to Freud, namely oral, anal, phallic , latent, and genital. One respondent stated that "children's psychosexual development consists of five stages, namely the oral, anal, phallic , latent, and genital stages," and emphasized that understanding each stage helps educators provide sex education appropriate to the child's age and development. Another respondent emphasized that the phallic stage is a crucial stage in children's sex education because at this time children begin to be curious about the body and gender differences. He stated, "In children's sex education, the phallic stage is the most important because children begin to be curious about the body and gender differences. Teachers need to provide simple and correct explanations so that children do not misunderstand."

However, not all prospective teachers share the same understanding. Some respondents answered "never heard of" when asked about Freud's stages of psychosexual development . This finding indicates a gap in theoretical knowledge among prospective early childhood education teachers. On the one hand, some prospective teachers already understand the basics of children's psychosexual development. On the other hand, some prospective teachers still lack an adequate conceptual understanding. This is important to note because understanding child development is the basis for teachers in determining age-appropriate sexuality education materials, language, and strategies.

The second finding relates to the importance of using the proper names for body parts, such as the vagina and penis. Most respondents believe that using correct anatomical terms is important from an early age so that children can properly understand their bodies and avoid viewing certain parts as taboo or shameful. One respondent stated that "using proper names like vagina and penis is important in children's sex education because it helps children understand their bodies correctly and healthily." The respondent also added that children who know the proper names for body parts are better able to communicate clearly in the event of abuse.

A similar view is also seen in another response that states, "Real names help children understand their bodies correctly and not consider them taboo. This also helps children dare to speak up if there is pain or abuse. Pseudonyms often confuse children and are inappropriate." This quote shows that prospective Gen Z early childhood education teachers understand the use of body terms not only from a biological perspective, but also from a child protection perspective. The use of appropriate terms is seen as helping children convey bodily experiences clearly, especially when children experience discomfort, pain, or actions that lead to sexual abuse.

The third finding indicates that prospective early childhood education teachers understand the importance of tailoring explanations about birth to the cognitive level of young children. Respondents generally emphasized the use of simple, concrete, honest, and non-biological language. One respondent stated that the appropriate approach is to use “simple, concrete, and age-appropriate language,” for example, explaining that “a baby grows in the mother’s womb, then when it is big and strong enough, the baby comes out to meet the family.” Another respondent stated that teachers simply explain that “a baby grows in the womb and is born through the birthing process, without complicated biological details.”

These findings demonstrate a pedagogical awareness that early childhood sexuality education should be provided in accordance with the characteristics of children's cognitive development. Young children do not yet require complex biological explanations, but they do need accurate, simple, and unmistakable information. Learning media is also considered important. Several respondents suggested the use of picture books, puppets, stories, songs, educational videos, and role-playing games to help children more concretely understand the concepts of the body, birth, and privacy.

The fourth finding shows that sexuality education is understood as a means to develop concepts of bodily privacy and self-protection. Respondents stated that children need to recognize private body parts, understand that not everyone can touch their bodies, and have the courage to refuse and report any discomfort. One respondent stated that sex education helps children “know their private body parts, know when to say 'no,' and have the courage to report any inappropriate behavior.” Another respondent stated that sex education can be a “provision” for children to recognize which body parts others can and cannot touch.

This quote demonstrates that prospective Gen Z early childhood education teachers view sexuality education as part of child safety education. Children are not only taught to recognize their bodies but also to be brave in maintaining their boundaries. In the early childhood education context, this concept can be

taught through simple rules, such as "body parts covered by underwear are private," "not everyone can touch our bodies," and "children can say no if they feel uncomfortable."

The fifth finding indicates that respondents considered the role of parents and teachers crucial in creating a safe environment for children to ask questions about sexuality. One respondent stated that parents and teachers need to be “open, patient, and non-judgmental when children ask questions, so that children feel safe to share their curiosity.” Another respondent stated that parents and teachers need to be “open, not scolding children when they ask questions, and provide short, honest answers so that children feel safe.”

These findings demonstrate that prospective Gen Z early childhood education teachers recognize the importance of healthy communication between children and adults. Children who are scolded or shamed when asking questions about their bodies are likely to be afraid to ask again. Conversely, children who receive warm, honest, and age-appropriate responses are more likely to rely on parents and teachers as their primary sources of information. This is crucial because young children are not yet able to independently filter information, especially information from peers, digital media, or the external environment.

The sixth finding relates to the challenges of implementing sexuality education in early childhood education (PAUD). Respondents cited several obstacles, including the taboo nature of sexuality education, teachers' perceived awkwardness, a lack of teacher knowledge, limited learning media, a lack of training, and the potential for parental rejection. One respondent stated that the challenge faced by PAUD teachers was "a lack of understanding and confidence in delivering the material because the topic is still considered taboo." The respondent also cited a lack of parental support and limited media as other obstacles. Another respondent stated that the obstacles were "teachers' perceived awkwardness, lack of knowledge, and parents' perception that sex education is taboo."

These findings indicate that barriers to sexuality education stem not only from knowledge but also from socio-cultural aspects. Teachers need not only the right materials, but also professional courage and communication skills to explain to parents that early childhood sexuality education is not adult sexual instruction, but rather education about the body, privacy, health, and self-protection.

The seventh finding indicates that respondents have strategic ideas for overcoming these barriers. Some of the strategies proposed include attending training, using age-appropriate learning media, building communication with parents, providing outreach on the goals of sexuality education, and integrating the material into children's daily activities. One respondent stated that teachers could "attend training, use age-appropriate materials, and explain the goals of sex education to parents to avoid misunderstandings." Another respondent stated that teachers could "attend training, collaborate with parents, and use culturally appropriate approaches," as well as using stories, songs, and pictures to make the material easier for children to understand.

The eighth finding shows that sexuality education is also understood as a means of building respect for gender differences. Respondents believe that children need to learn to respect themselves and others, not to discriminate, and to understand the differences between men and women appropriately. One respondent stated that understanding gender differences is important "so that children grow up with mutual respect, not to discriminate, and to accept differences as normal." Another respondent stated that understanding gender identity can foster an inclusive, safe, and diverse environment.

The ninth finding shows that sexuality education is seen as helping children filter out sexual information circulating outside the control of parents and teachers. One respondent stated that early sex education helps children develop a "correct foundational understanding of their bodies, relationships, and boundaries," enabling them to filter out false or inappropriate information from the media and peers. Another respondent stated that children who have received correct information "find it easier to distinguish between what is safe and what is wrong, so they are less likely to believe misleading information."

The tenth finding indicates that prospective early childhood education teachers' perceptions influence their intentions to provide sexuality education to children. Respondents stated that prospective teachers with positive perceptions are more prepared and confident in teaching sexuality education. One respondent stated that "prospective teachers who have a positive understanding and feel competent tend to be more prepared and confident in teaching this topic appropriately," while prospective teachers who are still unsure tend to avoid discussing sexuality. Another respondent stated that if prospective teachers view sex education as important for protecting children, they will be more confident and confident in teaching it from an early age.

Overall, the research results indicate that prospective Gen Z PAUD teachers' perceptions of early childhood sexuality education are positive. They understand sexuality education as education for self-protection, body awareness, establishing privacy, preventing abuse, and strengthening communication

between children and adults. However, the results also indicate a need for strengthening conceptual and pedagogical aspects, learning media, teacher training, and communication with parents.

Discussion

Based on the research results, the discussion is organized around eight themes: sexuality education as child self-protection, correct body terminology, developmental appropriateness, the roles of teachers and parents, socio-cultural challenges, safety literacy in the digital era, respect for gender, and the readiness of Generation Z pre-service PAUD teachers.

1. Sexuality Education as an Effort to Protect Children

The results show that Generation Z pre-service PAUD teachers view early childhood sexuality education as a form of self-protection. It is not understood as teaching sexual activity, but as introducing children to their bodies, private parts, limits on touch, the courage to say "no," and the ability to report concerns to a trusted adult. This perception reflects an understanding that sexuality education can serve a preventive child-protection function.

This interpretation is consistent with Nisa [6], who emphasizes early sexuality education as a way to help children feel valued and protected, and with Nilawati et al. [5], who frame early sex education as supporting healthy behavior and prevention. Indonesian child-protection guidance also highlights body knowledge, privacy, puberty preparation, and prevention of sexual risk [32]. International guidance treats comprehensive, age-appropriate sexuality education as a broader health and safety intervention [11], [12], while prevention literature emphasizes its potential role in reducing sexual violence [16]. Child-safety programs can also strengthen preschool children's self-protection skills [17], and age-appropriate comprehensive sexuality education programs provide a practical route for strengthening children's understanding [14].

2. Correct Use of Body Terms as an Educational and Protection Strategy

Interviews show that prospective Generation Z PAUD teachers consider it important to introduce the correct names of body parts, such as vagina and penis. Accurate anatomical terms can support healthy body knowledge, reduce unnecessary shame, and help children communicate clearly about pain, discomfort, or inappropriate contact.

This finding aligns with Binantari et al. [2], who identify correct body terminology as an entry point for early childhood sexuality education, and with Nisa [6], who emphasizes body recognition within a protective educational framework. Indonesian early-childhood research also shows that educators must translate sexuality education into themes and methods that are understandable and acceptable in classroom practice [13]. Clear body-safety language is particularly relevant to prevention and recognition of child sexual abuse [15].

3. Appropriateness of Sexuality Education to Children's Developmental Stages

The results indicate uneven understanding of psychosexual development among prospective teachers. Some participants could explain oral, anal, phallic, latency, and genital stages, while others had not encountered these concepts. This gap suggests a need to strengthen developmental foundations so that future teachers can match sexuality education content, language, and strategies to children's age and developmental needs.

Age-appropriate guidance is especially important when children begin to distinguish bodies, gender, privacy, and social boundaries [31]. Evidence also shows that children can vary in their understanding and attitudes toward sexual-abuse prevention, requiring continued adult guidance [3]. From a learning perspective, new concepts are better introduced by connecting them to learners' existing understanding and developmental readiness [9]. Educational practice should also recognize biological and developmental diversity and provide individualized support when children's needs differ [7].

4. The Role of Teachers and Parents in Building Safe Sexuality Communication

Participants identified parents and teachers as key adults in creating a safe environment for children to ask questions about their bodies and sexuality. Adults need to respond openly, patiently, and without judgment, using short, honest, developmentally appropriate explanations. Supportive responses can make children more willing to seek information from trusted adults rather than unreliable external sources.

This finding is consistent with early childhood sexuality education that prioritizes child protection and respectful communication [6]. Because sexuality education remains culturally sensitive in many settings, coordination between teachers and parents is important [5]. Teacher knowledge is also a critical prevention resource: strengthening educators' knowledge can improve implementation of sexuality education and

abuse-prevention practices [18]. Parents' perceptions vary across demographic contexts [20], and Asian evidence indicates that parental knowledge is a central component of young children's sexuality education [21].

5. Socio-Cultural Challenges in the Implementation of Sexuality Education

Participants described perceived taboo, limited teacher knowledge, insufficient training, limited learning media, and concern about parental reactions as major implementation barriers. These challenges show that sexuality education depends not only on content knowledge but also on professional confidence and culturally responsive communication.

These barriers are consistent with Indonesian reports that early childhood sexuality education is often treated as taboo [5] and that implementation needs to be aligned with religious and cultural values [2]. Teachers may also face practical strategy and confidence barriers when teaching self-protection [19]. Cross-cultural research with children likewise shows that sexuality education must respond to local expectations, family norms, and the social context in which children learn [22].

6. Sexuality Education as Safety Literacy in the Digital Era

Participants also viewed sexuality education as helping children filter sexual information encountered outside parental or teacher control. Digital media, peers, television, and the surrounding environment can expose children to information they are not prepared to interpret; early guidance can help them recognize discomfort and seek clarification from trusted adults.

This theme is relevant to Generation Z pre-service teachers, whose learning characteristics are strongly shaped by digital technology [23]. Pre-service teacher education therefore needs to strengthen digital competence alongside pedagogical judgment [24]. A systematic review of pre-service teachers in early childhood and primary education similarly highlights digital competence as a professional preparation issue rather than a skill that can be assumed from age alone [25].

7. Respect for Gender and the Formation of Healthy Social Relations

Participants viewed understanding gender differences as part of sexuality education and as a basis for respecting oneself and others. In this framing, sexuality education is not limited to body knowledge; it also contributes to healthy social relationships, privacy, and non-discriminatory interaction.

The National Center on Parent, Family and Community Engagement notes that young children begin to notice gender and relationships early and benefit from appropriate adult guidance [31]. Children's understanding of abuse, gender, and protective behavior can remain uneven across school age [3], while early sexuality education can support a positive and protected understanding of the self [6].

8. Readiness of Generation Z Pre-Service PAUD Teachers to Provide Sexuality Education

Positive perceptions were associated with greater intention and confidence to provide sexuality education. Prospective teachers who understand the topic as child protection tend to be more prepared to teach it, whereas limited knowledge or persistent perceptions of taboo can reduce confidence.

Teacher readiness therefore requires pedagogical, digital, interpersonal, and social-emotional competence [4]. Contextual and culturally appropriate sexuality education can make classroom implementation more acceptable [2], while correct conceptual understanding can help move the topic beyond taboo toward child protection [5]. Where pre-service preparation uses collaborative learning tasks, group structure and size can influence participation and productivity and should be considered in training design [10].

CONCLUSION

Early childhood sexuality education should be positioned as an integral part of child-protection education. It includes body awareness, correct anatomical terms, privacy, the courage to refuse uncomfortable touch, reporting skills, respect for gender, and early skills for filtering age-inappropriate sexual information.

Generation Z pre-service PAUD teachers in this study generally showed positive perceptions of sexuality education but still required stronger conceptual and pedagogical preparation. Effective implementation therefore depends on prospective teachers' competence, parental support, school readiness, and age-, culture-, and developmentally appropriate learning approaches.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors thank the Department of Early Childhood Education, Yogyakarta State University, for providing the opportunity to conduct the study, the undergraduate PAUD students who participated in the interviews, and LPDP for its support.

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