

# IMAGING FUTURE SEXUALITY EDUCATORS: ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS OF STUDENT TEACHERS AT SAPIENZA TOWARDS SEXUALITY EDUCATION

**Valeria Bruno, Roberto Baiocco, & Jessica Pistella**

*Department of Development and Social Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome (Italy)*

## Abstract

Italy has no specific initial teacher training curriculum on Sexuality Education. In undergraduate programs for early childhood and primary school education, topics related to sexuality and its development within the framework of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) are rarely addressed. The Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe assert the need to address such issues within the 0-4 age group. It is considered crucial to provide young people with accurate, age-appropriate, and scientifically accurate information about sexuality and sexual health. This education should be comprehensive, covering various aspects of sexuality, such as families and relationships, respect, consent, bodily autonomy, anatomy, puberty, menstruation, contraception, pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, social influences, sexual identity, gender equality, and human rights. In Italy, such training is provided through specific courses that individuals can voluntarily undertake outside university curricula. The main challenge is that these courses come with high costs, making them inaccessible to everyone. And still, to design adequate training, it is necessary to understand the needs of the future recipients. The research, therefore, arose from the question: What were the attitudes and opinions of future educators and teachers in early childhood and primary schools regarding Sexuality Education, both in general and in terms of practical and methodological application within the Italian educational and school system? The objective was to investigate the participants' perspectives and identify training needs. Existing literature highlights numerous weaknesses in training educational personnel on Sexuality Education. Among the reasons for this lack is the educational responsibility being primarily entrusted to experts external to the school or family context and a still heterogeneous and resistant attitude towards these issues, mainly when addressed with children. In the considered undergraduate programs, there are young adults who, according to research and literature, still rely heavily on internet-based and self-directed learning. The research was an exploratory case study at the Sapienza University of Rome. The sample, expected to consist of at least 300 participants, was drawn from the reference population: 851 students enrolled in undergraduate education and training programs for early childhood and primary education. It involved administering a questionnaire based on international scientific literature concerning the educational needs of the student community and the training needs of teaching and academic staff. The questionnaire had close and open questions and aimed to understand pre-service educators' and teachers' perspectives toward Sexuality Education.

**Keywords:** *Sexuality education, student teachers, early childhood education, primary school education, attitudes.*

---

## 1. Introduction

The World Health Organization established Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe, providing the first clear international definition (WHO, 2010). Sexuality Education (SE) is a lifelong learning process that begins in early childhood and follows an individual's development. While teaching sensitive and challenging topics, many must develop skills necessary for daily life. Addressing issues such as sexual rights, gender identity, gender pedagogy, education on emotions, respect, and consent is fundamental. SE aims to increase and improve knowledge by imparting information and skills, enabling recipients to apply their knowledge and attitudes, and helping develop a positive and respectful self-view and view of others.

Over the years, additional international documents have shared this comprehensive vision (UNESCO, 2018; Plan International, 2020). SE has long been considered an integral part of an

individual's sexual rights (WAS, 2014), thus a right for everyone to have access to information and education on sexuality-related issues in their various components. The need for SE is further evidenced by its presence in Goals 3, 4, and 5 of the 2030 Agenda (UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2023).

Italy has consistently ranked poorly compared to other European countries in terms of enacting supportive laws and implementing SE into the school system (Stettini, 2004). However, the current Italian context is characterized by a wide range of projects proposed by experts, albeit heterogeneous in terms of geography, content, themes, and methods. Italy only offers 29% of activities and projects aligned with international declarations and definitions, i.e., within the Comprehensive SE (CSE) (Chinelli et al., 2022). The results of the National Fertility Study Project (Pizzi, Spinelli, Andreozzi, & Battilomo, 2019) partly reflect the young Italian people's desires for CSE. Specifically, young adults enrolled in university have an average age of 22 years. Over 90% of participants claim to receive and learn online information. Additionally, about half of participants identify the school system as the primary location to receive CSE, with approximately 30% mentioning specific educational-informative meetings.

The need for teacher and educator staff training stems from the perceived necessity by adolescent and university students and experts who advocate for the introduction of CSE (Astle et al., 2021; Bauer, Hämmerli, & Leeners, 2020; Dbouba & Shannon, 2018; Lahoz-García, Jimenez, Castro, & Parejo, 2024), scientifically, age-appropriately, positively, without judgment, and consciously, in a safe, healthy, and protected environment like school. Global comparisons published by UNESCO (2021; 2023), in which Italy is not present, emphasize the need for training, stating the importance of initiating investments, increasing pedagogical knowledge and skills in offering CSE in schools, and investing in research on teacher and educator training models. However, before aspiring to understand how to train educators and teachers potentially, it is necessary to investigate their perceptions and thoughts to avoid designing a top-down training distance from the recipients' needs and context. On the other hand, it is challenging to ascertain what educators and teachers would need. Research in this field (Ang & Lee, 2017; Balter, van Rhijn, & Davies, 2018; Klein, 2021) shows some results regarding the perspectives of educators and practicing teachers: the perceived lack of knowledge and competence, leading to a need for training; the importance given to issues and the sense of adequacy and comfort in addressing CSE; and finally, the willingness and motivation to be trained and teach CSE in the future.

Scientific evidence affirms that addressing CSE topics in early childhood education and primary school contributes to achieving CSE goals, healthy sexual development, both individual's and society's wellness and to prevent child sexual abuse (Kenny et al., 2008; Putri, 2022; Schneider & Hirsch, 2020; Tirtawinata, 2016; Walsh, Zwi, Woolfenden, & Shlonsky, 2018). Evidence contradicts the notion that aspects of sexuality cannot be discussed in the early years of life. In fact, the earlier CSE starts, the better (Smyle, Maticka-Tyndale, & Boyd, 2008); awareness and competencies regarding gender identities and sexual orientations (Hermann-Wilmarth, Lannen, & Ryan, 2017; Ryan, Patraw, & Bednar, 2013), self-esteem, and body image (Halliwell et al., 2016) increase, while the development of stereotypes and harmful biases decrease (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021).

The literature shows that student educators and teachers already perceive a lack of knowledge to address CSE in their future educational practices (Brouskeli & Sapountzis, 2017; Jiménez-Ríos, González-Gijón, Martínez-Heredia, & Amaro Agudo, 2023). Hence, this research aims to understand the participants' perspectives for a broader purpose: to design a CSE training that is more concrete and coherent with the needs of all and with the Italian context. As the research is in a preliminary phase, the methodological aspects and hypotheses of the study are presented below.

## 2. Design

The research project is structured as a multiple exploratory case study with quantitative methodology. Through the administration of a questionnaire, the research aims to explore the perspectives of students currently enrolled in the Degree programs in Educational Sciences and Training (L-19), Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (LM-85), and Primary Education Sciences (LM-85 bis) at the Sapienza University of Rome regarding CSE, both in general and in terms of its practical and methodological aspects within the Italian educational and school system. The hypothesis is that pre-service educators and teachers generally have a positive attitude towards CSE and show a need for training in this regard, but with differences based on age, gender, and sexual orientation, as well as the influence of religion, political orientation, sexual myths, personal beliefs and level of sexism. The Ethics Committee has approved the research for Transdisciplinary Research of Sapienza University of Rome.

### 2.1. Objectives

The research aims to investigate attitudes, opinions, and educational needs regarding CSE of pre-service educators and teachers enrolled in the Degree programs in the educational and training field of

Sapienza University of Rome. The objective stems from the following research questions: How do educators and teachers in training perceive CSE in schools? How do they perceive CSE in their professional development? Four specific objectives have been determined: (1) to identify the participants' attitudes towards CSE; (2) to identify the participants' opinions on teaching CSE; (3) to investigate the self-perceived sense of competence and comfort in hypothetically teaching CSE; (4) and to explore the potential demand for specific training within the unit of analysis.

## 2.2. Methods

The study will be conducted on a sample of at least 300 participants. The sample size was calculated based on the statistical analyses that were performed. This number of participants is deemed optimal for the exploratory factor analysis anticipated in the project. All current students enrolled in the Degree programs in Educational Sciences and Training (L-19), Pedagogy and Educational Sciences (LM-85), and Primary Education Sciences (LM-85 bis) at the Sapienza University of Rome constitute the target population of the research. According to the currently enrolled students (academic year 2023/2024), there are 851 students across these programs (L-19 = 370; LM-85 = 76; LM-85 bis = 405). Those currently enrolled in these programs and consented to be contacted for research purposes will be included in the desired population. The number of 300 participants will be selected from the desired population through simple random sampling. A self-report online questionnaire using the Qualtrics platform is planned to achieve the research's objectives. The instrument has both closed and open-ended questions, and it has been constructed based on insights from international literature and the current Italian context regarding CSE (Gradellini et al., 2022; Lunde, Blaaid, Gerbild, & Areskoug Josefsson, 2022; Pássaro, Regra, Serrão, & Marques 2019; Yao & Lee, 2023), as well as the attitudes, opinions, and educational needs of teachers regarding these topics. The questionnaire includes explicitly a section with questions on demographic variables and past experiences with education or training on CSE.

Again, questions were included to investigate participants' attitudes and opinions on methodological aspects, themes, and stakeholders of CSE. The third section of the questionnaire aims to identify the need for training and comfort regarding CSE topics, as well as motivation and willingness to undergo training and then integrate CSE into future educational practices. The last section includes the scale on ambivalent sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) to investigate the presence of gender prejudice by administering subscales on hostile and benevolent sexism. Statistical analyses will be conducted using SPSS software. A factor analysis will be performed to assess the reliability and validity of the scales included in the questionnaire using Cronbach's alpha. First, descriptive analyses will be conducted to test the hypothesis of a generally positive attitude among students. A univariate analysis of variance will be performed. In this analysis, the dependent variable will be the attitude towards CSE, while the independent variable will be the group membership (i.e., type of Degree: L-19, LM-85, LM-85 bis). Additionally, the effects of sexual myths, beliefs, and training needs on the dependent variable (attitude) will be considered. Finally, a categorical analysis (Batini et al., 2020) of the questionnaire responses to open-ended questions will be conducted using a bottom-up reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Responses will be categorized to provide aggregated results, and descriptive analyses will be performed on these categorizations.

## 3. Conclusions

In Italy, Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) training is often left to the individual's discretion; teachers and educators choose whether to include and address CSE topics in their educational activities and whether to seek training through external professional courses or academic studies. An analysis of needs and context is necessary to understand the perspectives and needs of the participants. The potential of this study lies in the lack of similar research in the Italian context. This research aims to contribute to highlighting the training needs of future educators and teachers regarding CSE topics during childhood. Through an exploratory multiple case study in the educational and training Degree programs at Sapienza University of Rome, the research aims to investigate the participants' attitudes, opinions, and training needs. This will be accomplished by administering a designed questionnaire to explore these aspects. The importance of collecting this data lies in identifying the lacking areas in training to understand how to enhance their preparation to increase educational and school activities on these topics. Therefore, future educators and teachers will be able to provide educational continuity on CSE that is aligned with the needs of all individuals. As evidenced in the literature, this is an essential factor in ensuring people's well-being.

## References

- Ang, C. T., & Lee, L. W. (2017). Psychometric characteristics of a sexuality education survey for teachers of secondary school students with learning disabilities in Malaysia. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, 17(3), 198–204. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12378>
- Astle, S., McAllister, P., Emanuels, S., Rogers, J., Toews, M., & Yazedjian, A. (2021). College students' suggestions for improving sex education in schools beyond 'blah blah blah condoms and STDs'. *Sex Education*, 21(1), 91–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2020.1749044>
- Balter, A. S., van Rhijn, T., & Davies, A. W. J. (2018). Equipping early childhood educators to support the development of sexuality in childhood: Identification of pre- and post-service training needs. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, 27(1), 33–42. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjhs.2017-0036>
- Batini, F., Barbisoni, G., Pera, E., Toti, G., Sposetti, P., Szpunar, G., Gabrielli, S., Stanzione, I., Dalledonne Vandini, C., Montefusco, C., Santonicola, M., Vegliante, R., Morini, L. A., & Scipione, L. (2020). Un modello di analisi delle domande aperte nell'indagine nazionale SIRD sulla didattica a distanza durante l'emergenza Covid-19. *RicercaAzione*, 12(2), 47–71. <https://doi.org/10.32076/RA12211>
- Bauer, M., Hämmerli, S., & Leeners, B. (2020). Unmet needs in sex education: What adolescents aim to understand about sexuality of the other sex. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 67(2), 245–252. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.02.015>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). Thematic analysis. In E. Lyons, & A. Coyle (Eds.). *Analysing qualitative data in psychology* (pp. 128–147). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Brouskeli, V., & Sapountzis, A. (2017). Early childhood sexuality education: Future educators' attitudes and considerations. *Research in Education*, 99(1), 56–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034523717740149>
- Chinelli, A., Salfa, M. C., Cellini, A., Ceccarelli, L., Farinella, M., Rancilio, L., Galipò, R., Meli, P., Camposeragna, A., Colaprico, L., Oldrini, M., Ubbiali, M., Caraglia, A., Martinelli, D., Mortari, L., Palamara, A. T., Suligoi, B., & Tavoschi, L. (2022). Sexuality education in Italy 2016-2020: A national survey investigating coverage, content and evaluation of school-based educational activities. *Sex Education*, 23(6), 756–768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2022.2134104>
- Dbouba, G., & Shannon, A. (2018). *Sex ed is our right!*. YouthCO & CBCR. Retrieved 03.22.2024, from [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/youthco/pages/1943/attachments/original/1536258468/Sex\\_Ed\\_Reportfinal.pdf?1536258468](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/youthco/pages/1943/attachments/original/1536258468/Sex_Ed_Reportfinal.pdf?1536258468)
- Glick, P., & Fiske, S. T. (1996). The ambivalent sexism inventory: Differentiating hostile and benevolent sexism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70, 491–512. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.70.3.491>
- Goldfarb, E. S., & Lieberman, L. D. (2021). Three decades of research: The case for comprehensive sex education. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 68, 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2020.07.036>
- Gradellini, C., Kaleci, S., Sim-Sim, M., Dias, H., Mecugni, D., Aaberg, V., & Gómez-Cantarino, S. (2022). Adaptation and validation of the sexuality attitudes and beliefs scale for the Italian context. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19, 14162. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192114162>
- Halliwell, E., Yager, Z., Paraskeva, N., Diedrichs, P. C., Smith, H., & White, P. (2016). Body image in primary schools: A pilot evaluation of a primary school intervention program designed by teachers to improve children's body satisfaction. *Body Image*, 19, 133–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2016.09.002>
- Hermann-Wilmarth, J. M., Lannen, R., & Ryan, C. L. (2017). Critical literacy and transgender topics in an upper elementary classroom: A portrait of possibility. *Journal of Language and Literacy Education*, 13, 15–27.
- Jiménez-Ríos, F. J., González-Gijón, G., Martínez-Heredia, N., & Amaro Agudo, A. (2023). Sex education and comprehensive health education in the future of educational professionals. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 20(4), 3296. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20043296>
- Kenny, M. C., Capri, V., Thakkar-Kolar, R., Ryan, E. E., & Runyon, M. K. (2008). Child sexual abuse: From prevention to self-protection. *Child Abuse Review*, 17(1), 36–54. <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.1012>
- Klein, S. (2021). Dialogues between physical education teaching training and comprehensive sexual education act: Tensions, discussions, continuities, and discontinuities from the perspective of undergraduates from ISEF N°2 Federico W. Dickens, Buenos Aires. *Educación Física y Ciencia*, 23(1), e157. <https://doi.org/10.24215/23142561e157>

- Lahoz-García, C., Jimenez, L. M., Castro, M. J., & Parejo, J. L. (2024). *Let's talk about sex: College students' attitudes towards sexuality education in a Spanish university*. Preprint version available on medRxiv. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2024.03.07.24303955>
- Lunde, G. H., Blaaid, L., Gerbild, H., & Areskoug Josefsson, K. (2022). Assessment of the psychometrics of the students' attitudes towards addressing sexual health extended (SA-SH-Ext) questionnaire for social educator students. *Sexual Medicine, 10*(3), 1059–1070. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esxm.2022.100507>
- Pássaro, A. C., Regra, M. C., Serrão, C., & Marques, A. P. (2019). Cultural adaptation and reliability of the questionnaire of sex education in schools. *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva, 24*(7), 2601–2608. <https://doi.org/10.1590/1413-81232018247.14892017>
- Pizzi, E., Spinelli, A., Andreozzi, S., & Battilomo, S. (2019). *Progetto "Studio nazionale fertilità": I risultati delle cinque indagini*. Roma: Istituto Superiore di Sanità. Retrieved 03.22.2024, from [https://www.sigo.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Rapporto\\_Istisan\\_Progetto\\_Fertilita.pdf](https://www.sigo.it/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Rapporto_Istisan_Progetto_Fertilita.pdf)
- Plan International (2020). *Putting the c in CSE: Standards for content, delivery and environment of comprehensive sexuality education*. United Kingdom: Plan International. Retrieved 03.22.2024, from <https://plan-international.org/publications/comprehensive-sexuality-education-programme-standards/>
- Putri, G. A. B. A. (2022). Sex education in elementary school to prevent sexual abuse of children. *Progres Pendidikan, 3*(1), 7–11. <https://doi.org/10.29303/prospek.v3i1.220>
- Ryan, C. L., Patraw, J. M., & Bednar M. (2013). Discussing princess boys and pregnant men: Teaching about gender diversity and transgender experiences within an elementary school curriculum. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 10*, 83–105. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2012.718540>
- Schneider, M., & Hirsch, J. S. (2020). Comprehensive sexuality education as a primary prevention strategy for sexual violence perpetration. *Trauma Violence Abuse, 21*(3), 439–455. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838018772855>
- Smylie, L., Maticka-Tyndale, E., & Boyd, D. (2008). Evaluation of a school-based sex education programme delivered to grade nine students in Canada. *Sex Education: Sexuality, Society and Learning, 8*, 25–46. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681810701811795>
- Stettini, P. (2004). L'educazione sessuale tra nuovi paradigmi, evidenze e sfide. *Rivista di sessuologia clinica, X*(1), 47–65.
- Tirtawinata, C. M. (2016). Importance of sex education since early age for preventing sexual harassment. *HUMANIORA, 7*(2), 201–209. <https://doi.org/10.21512/humaniora.v7i2.3523>
- UN (2015). *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. Retrieved 03.22.2024, from <https://sdgs.un.org/publications/transforming-our-world-2030-agenda-sustainable-development-17981>
- UNESCO (2018). *International technical guidance on sexuality education: An EVIDENCE-INFORMED APPROACH*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. Retrieved 03.22.2024, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000260770>
- UNESCO (2021). *The journey towards comprehensive sexuality education: Global status report*. Parigi, Francia. Retrieved 03.22.2024, from <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379607>
- UNESCO (2023). *Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) country profiles*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. <https://doi.org/10.54676/GEHJ7312>. Retrieved 03.22.2024, from <https://wcaro.unfpa.org/en/publications/comprehensive-sexuality-educationkey-considerations-implementation-and-scaling-west-and>
- Walsh, K., Zwi, K., Woolfenden, S., & Shlonsky, A. (2018). School-based education programs for the prevention of child sexual abuse: A cochrane systematic review and meta-analysis. *Research on Social Work Practice, 28*, 33–55. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731515619705>
- WAS (2014). *Declaration of sexual rights*. World Association for Sexual Health. Retrieved 03.22.2024, from [https://worldsexualhealth.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/declaration\\_of\\_sexual\\_rights\\_sep03\\_2014\\_b.pdf](https://worldsexualhealth.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/declaration_of_sexual_rights_sep03_2014_b.pdf)
- WHO (2010). *Standards for sexuality education in Europe: A framework for policy makers, educational and health authorities and specialists*. World Health Organization, Regional office for Europe and BZgA. Retrieved 03.22.2024, from <https://www.bzga-whocc.de/en/publications/standards-for-sexuality-education/>
- Yeo, K. J., & Lee, S. H. (2023). Development and validation of an instrument to measure parental attitude and health beliefs toward sexuality education. *SAGE Open, 1–12*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221139470>