EXPLORING SEXUALITY IN EDUCATIONAL
AND TEACHING DEGREE PROGRAMS

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Abstract

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is a lifelong learning process that begins in early childhood. International literature and guidelines emphasize the necessity of CSE in the school environment, highlighting educational and teaching staff training needs. However, Italy lacks a law supporting CSE in schools and has no initial training curriculum for teachers and educators focused on CSE topics. In undergraduate programs for early childhood and primary school education, topics related to sexuality are rarely addressed. Training is offered in the Italian context, typically through specific courses that individuals can voluntarily undertake; however, a significant challenge is that these courses often come with high costs, making them inaccessible to many. Within this sociocultural, educational, and training context in Italy, the educational project for the EDUSex Open Badge was developed at the Sapienza University of Rome as part of the Open Badge EDU Sapienza and service-learning framework. This elective and no-cost course is specifically designed for educational and training degree program students. The course consists of 12 in-person sessions, with one three-hour meeting per week, following a pilot training program offered during the 2023-24 academic year, including in-person and online sessions for two three-hour weekly meetings. The course has been adjusted based on student feedback, including only weekly three-hour in-person sessions. The project aims to promote methodologies and skills to address educational, social, and practical needs through participatory activities. Additionally, the course helps students reflect on their concepts, sexual scripts, beliefs, and attitudes toward sexuality and CSE, enabling them to separate their personal perspectives from scientific and accurate information in the future. The course covers a wide range of CSE topics, including sexual health, sexual identity, rights, the LGBTQIA+ community, emotions and relationships, consent, respect and gender-based violence, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, sexual development, sexual pleasure, stereotypes, socio-cultural and personal influences, and educational planning for CSE across different age groups. Competency evaluation includes three formative assessments: the first involves small group work in which students present an insight into a chosen topic; the second requires each student to design an educational or teaching project to propose to schools hypothetically; and the third is a written test to assess knowledge gained from the training. This three-step assessment is accompanied by initial and final questionnaires that evaluate knowledge and attitudes.

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

1. Introduction

Sexuality Education (SE) is recognized as a lifelong learning process beginning in early childhood, as sexuality develops from life's first steps and can be expressed in different ways during life's phases (Dias & Sim-Sim, 2024). By following the natural sense of education, from the Latin word educĕre – conducting out and guiding – during the entire body, psychologic, affective, and brain development (Arain et al., 2013; Gavin et al., 2009), SE should go along with sexual development, and early is the start better are the results (Advocates for Youth, 2009). Literature indeed affirms that implementing CSE since early childhood education and primary school contributes to healthy development, both individuals' and society's well-being, and preventing abuse (Bruno et al., 2024a; Putri, 2022; Schneider & Hirsch, 2020).

However, in Italy, SE still faces traditional and conservative attitudes (Parker et al., 2009) and government resistance (Bruno, 2024). The Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe, although published more than a decade ago, provides a clear definition of SE that is still current and coherent with our societies (WHO & BZgA, 2010). SE means discussing topics related to sexual rights, sexual identities, emotions, consent, respect, development, and healthy behavior to promote knowledge, increase skills, and positive

attitudes toward all sexualities. This holistic and global vision toward sexuality shows that SE aims to combat the stereotype that sexuality is equal to sexual intercourse. Meanwhile, sexuality is conceptualized as an integral and fundamental part of the individual's life, crossing all aspects of it from the moral, ethical, and personal influences to the socio-cultural and historical ones passing through the anatomical, psychological, and affective ones. This vision aligns with the Comprehensive SE (CSE) approach, the gold standard between the three approaches known in the literature. Several international documents share the WHO & BZgA vision on SE (Plan International, 2020a; UNESCO, 2018), building a sort of community around the sexual right to have access to education on sexuality-related issues (WAS, 2014). CSE has positive effects on the promotion of healthy and safe sexual development for everyone, promoting respectful social relationships (Jiménez-Rìos et al, 2023), contrasting the other two approaches known as Abstinence-only and Abstinence-"plus" (Hawkins, 2024) and fostering three Goals of the 2030 Agenda – numbers 3, 4 and 5 (IPPF, 2016; UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2023).

The aim of providing CSE during every step of an individual's development collides with our current educational and training opportunities as a society. To improve empowerment, knowledge, skills, positive attitudes, comfort in discussing sexual topics, the feeling of being respected, the possibility to make informed decisions and give consent, and the urge for a greater sense of self-determination, CSE should be implemented in school curricula to help people understand and deconstruct stereotypes or taboo on sexuality. However, considering the context of teacher training, CSE seems to face global resistance. For instance, only a few countries have laws or national policies, and this lack produces various mandates for teacher education (IPPF, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). To develop shareable, replicable, and culture-based CSE teacher training programs, it is necessary to focus on increasing the implementation and assessment of designs for teacher training. Teachers perceive a lack of knowledge and competence, leading to a need for training; show the importance given to issues and the sense of adequacy and comfort in addressing CSE; and finally, the willingness and motivation to be trained in and teach CSE in the future (Balter et al., 2018; Bruno et al., 2024b; Klein, 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 et al., 2023). 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. The literature seems predominantly focused on short educational interventions or workshops and specific content to train teachers on CSE. Hence, this paper aims to present the training course on CSE in the frame of the Open Badge (OB) EDU Sapienza. Badges, from scouting, aim to stimulate interest development (Baden Powell, 1919), and as an educational tool, badges help people overcome their limits and enhance their skills and talents (Freinet, 1949). Nowadays, the OB EDU tool is a digital certification of knowledge, practical skills, and personal quality that aims to enhance the competencies of pre-service or in-service educators and teachers, promoting creative methodologies, collaborations, and skills on social and educational needs. By integrating informal and non-formal learning in an academic context, OB EDU enriches the training offered, aligning with professional needs. It has a transparent assessment process to increase specific and transversal skills, consisting of three steps: technical, written, and practical. This allows participants to participate actively in the assessment process, integrating peer-evaluation sessions, discussions, and peer-group work and facilitating both autonomous and critical competencies (Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Topping, 2009). Following the construction of OB EDU at Sapienza, the training project we present is the OB EDUSex Sapienza, an elective and no-cost course on CSE for future educators and primary school teachers. The methodological and structural aspects are presented below as the project is ongoing. The broader purpose is to understand how to design future CSE training as a university course.

2. Design

The OB EDUSex Sapienza was built based on literature, precisely two international recommendations for CSE contents (WHO & BZgA, 2010; Plan International, 2020c) and training structure (Plan International, 2020a; 2020b). The recommended structure should be 3-5 days of training; however, discussing CSE contents while facing own attitudes, values, opinions, and beliefs in a maximum of 5 days could be unproductive in the Italian context.

Increasing the number of days' training and focusing on reflection and acquisition of knowledge and skills, the OB EDUSex Sapienza is dedicated to students enrolled in Early childhood education (ECE) course, Pedagogy course (P), and Primary school education (PSE) course of Sapienza University of Rome.

In the academic year 2023-24, the first cycle of the OB EDUSex Sapienza provided training of 12 sessions, each of 3 hours, and in an alternative setting. Some sessions were, in fact, in-person, and some others online. From the final participants' feedback, in the second cycle of the training during the academic

year 2024-25, the 12 sessions were always in-person. Both cycles of training courses were divided into three phases.

 1. Welcome, group warm-up, and introduction to CSE (1 meeting).

 2. Course implementation and ongoing evaluation (9 meetings).

 3. Final evaluation for awarding the OB EDUSex Sapienza certification (2 meetings).

The meetings include experiential activities and active and creative participation to put the knowledge acquired and own reflections into play. At the end of the second phase, two meetings are scheduled for the final evaluation. The group's oral presentation on a chosen and agreed-upon topic is evaluated during the first. The last one is dedicated to completing the final questionnaire with a subsequent individual oral interview. While the first cycle is completed, allowing to adjust the training for the second cycle based on participants' feedback, the second training cycle is not finished yet.

2.1. Objectives

The training aim is to transmit scientific information contributing to reflection and awareness of own beliefs and experiences, helping future educators and teachers develop the capacity to manage conflictual or problematic situations and the project skills on CSE contents. Moreover, it aims to develop respectful, nonjudgmental, and inclusive communicational and relational skills through individual study, group work and discussion, and experiential activities. Three sub-objectives and several specific objectives correspond to the general objective (Table 1). The training course aims to increase the personal wealth of competencies toward CSE, defined as knowledge, attitudes, and practical skills.

Table 1. Objectives of the training project.

General objective	Sub-objectives	Specific objectives: To increase ...
To increase CSE expertise	To increase information	Knowledge of CSE definitions
		Knowledge of existing approaches
		Knowledge of CSE contents
	To raise awareness of a positive, non-judgmental, and scientific attitude	Awareness of judgments and stereotypes about sexuality
		Awareness of false myths and beliefs on sexuality and CSE
		Awareness of CSE results
	To increase design expertise on CSE	Knowledge of existing school practices on CSE
		Knowledge of legislative Italian context
		Knowledge about services and experts
		Expertise in design projects and lessons on CSE

The project, therefore, aims to increase knowledge and skills in educational project designing and communication, the management of group dynamics or critical situations, and awareness of individual and socio-cultural influences.

2.2. Methods

In the first training cycle, which was the pilot one, 12 students participated, while in the second one the students were 9. The 9 sessions of course implementation included discussion and reflection on several topics, thinking about possible methodologies to integrate and adapt each topic in different school subjects or educational activities. Each session offered literature references, materials, and tools to deeply understand how to communicate and implement the CSE content in school. It was thus possible to deepen listening skills, manage situations, and plan to transversal CSE content in school subjects. Below are the topics addressed in the order of the meetings held.

 1. First warm-up session and introduction to the course: Presentation of OB EduSex; moment of acquaintance between registered people and initial questionnaire to identify basic knowledge; warm-up activities and introduction of CSE.

 2. Consent and sexual identity: Participatory activity on consent and discussion on gender violence and rape culture, sexual identity, and its development.

 3. Sexual rights and educational design: The 16 sexual rights and the methodological aspects of planning when dealing with CSE in school; consequently, the roles of different people, the importance of informed consent, and shared responsibility were discussed.

 4. LGBTQ+ community, bullying, and discrimination: The sexual identity and its components were proposed again to deepen perceptions, attitudes, and experiences, examining the phenomenon of stereotypes, bullying, and discrimination.

 5. Bodily, sexual development, and sexual manifestations: Bodily changes from birth to puberty, and sexual development, discussing theories of development and life experiences; finally, time was

dedicated to the topic of childhood sexual manifestations, what is typical to observe and what constitutes a risky behavior, with related tools useful for addressing the topic.

6. Disability: Visibility of differences in terms of issues that are still little addressed in CSE; this session undermines stereotypes and cultural resistance regarding the sexuality of people with disabilities, addressing the legitimate presence of mixed emotions of parents to support.

7. Adolescence and sexual pleasure: CSE works to prevent future discomfort situations; consequently, this session addresses sexuality and its development in the delicate phase of adolescence; physiological aspects in the activation of sexual desire, sociocultural and personal influences; sexual response cycle from a historical point of view; finally, sexual dysfunctions and the role of education to prevent and/or treat them.

8. Online sexual activities (OSA), adulthood, relationships, and families: The topic of OSA and their use was discussed with differences based on age; the phenomenon of sexting for adolescents; sexuality in adulthood in general; and finally, relationships and attitudes towards the various types of families.

9. Contraception: More medical and preventive parts in which the different types of contraception were addressed - natural, barrier, hormonal, intrauterine, and sterilization.

10. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), voluntary termination of pregnancy (VTP)/abortion, and broad language: The topic of STIs was addressed, followed by the difference between IVG and abortion; finally, the topic of broad language, i.e. the use of alternative forms to the over-extended masculine: *, ə, ɜ, and over-extended feminine.

11. Final session: Oral group presentations on agreed topics – Influences on sexuality in childhood, sexuality in adolescence, and religion on sexuality – which allowed people to get involved and develop a lesson with associated participatory activity to experience the ability to respond to questions and curiosities. The work was part of the final evaluation to obtain the OB EduSex certification.

12. Final assessment: The final knowledge questionnaire was constructed, administered, and then explored in depth through an oral interview alongside discussing the individual project requested on a self-choice topic.

3. Conclusions

The training project adopted a multidimensional and integrated approach to address the complex challenges of CSE in contemporary society. The integration of the OB EDU represented a pedagogical innovation, allowing participating people to certify the assessment process through a digital certification, thus improving the transparency and traceability of learning.

The OB EDUSex focused on several topics, promoting active participation, personal reflection, and open discussion on sensitive issues. This approach can create an inclusive and stimulating educational environment, increasing knowledge and positive attitudes towards sexuality. Although the positive experience from both training cycles, some limitations must be underlined. Since it is not a compulsory course or included in the degree course, it does not provide training credits that can be added to one's study path. Consequently, the participants have had the best opportunity to manage study, work, and personal commitments to follow the training with the active participation required. Therefore, the data cannot be analyzed to allow an effective pre-post evaluation of the training; moreover, each cycle is different, and it is impossible to compare the pilot training with the second one. It seems crucial to consolidate these initiatives, pursue a continuous commitment to guarantee equal access to CSE, and promote respect for sexual differences and rights. Offering a CSE course at the Italian University represents a significant step. However, further efforts are needed to address challenges such as formal recognition of acquired skills and long-term impact analysis.

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