

ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION IN ITALY

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Abstract

Many countries lack the systematic implementation of age-appropriate and culturally relevant Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in schools and comprehensive teacher training programs, even if CSE is widely recognized as a fundamental human right. In Italy, teacher training is typically available only through voluntary courses outside the academic context, which often come at a high cost, making them inaccessible to many. CSE views sexuality, in its broadest sense, as a fundamental aspect of human life that evolves from early childhood. A lifelong learning process is required to address a wide range of topics, which can be categorized into several macro areas: sexual health, sexual identity, and its development, rights, the LGBTQIA+ community, emotions and relationships, intimacy, and sexual behaviors (private, public, healthy, and risky), consent, respect, and gender-based violence, contraception, sexually transmitted infections, sexual development, sexual pleasure, stereotypes, socio-cultural and personal influences, and educational planning for different age groups. For these reasons, the UNI-T project – a collaborative effort initiated in 2022 within the network of European universities CIVIS alliance, aimed at enhancing teacher education across Europe through innovative, international, and practical approaches – introduced the blended learning course Sexuality Education Training for Teachers and Educators (SETTE). The course aims to raise teachers' awareness of educational needs, helping them recognize how their own beliefs influence the messages they convey to students. Its goal is to create safer, healthier school environments where students can express their sexuality openly and respectfully. The course focuses on improving knowledge of CSE, developing educational skills, promoting positive and respectful attitudes, and fostering critical reflection. The course is considered complete after participants successfully finish two assessments: the evaluation of all modules' training and a final questionnaire.

Keywords: *Sexuality education, teacher's training, Italian school education, blended learning.*

1. Introduction

Italy has a long story with Sexuality Education (SE). While many speculations are focused on the religious Italian context or conservative perception toward sexuality (Lavizzari & Prearo, 2019; Parker et al., 2009), others focus on the sexuality concept. Since 1975, with the first law draft proposal, nothing has changed regarding SE implementation in schools and training programs (Bruno, 2024). In the present work, sexuality is considered an integral part of life experience in all its aspects – sociocultural, moral, ethical, psychological, emotional, and biological – that can influence and be influenced by personal beliefs, experiences, and life context (WHO & BZgA, 2010). Consequently, a comprehensive SE (CSE) refers to a lifelong learning process that begins in early childhood education. It follows the individual's development (ibidem) to guide people in their sexual exploration and disclosure to provide a safe and healthy approach to own and other sexuality. The elective setting would be each school's grade and level, adapting the CSE contents to the different ages of students and their sociocultural context, maintaining a shared responsibility with family's education and society's openness to every sexuality (UNESCO, 2018). However, only a few countries have laws supporting CSE in schools, and among these countries, there is Italy (IPPF, 2018; UNESCO, 2023), leading to poor teacher training and strengthening the false cultural myths about sexuality. In-service teachers perceived indeed a lack of knowledge regarding sexual topics, along with discomfort when forced to answer students' questions or to face problematic situations; moreover, they state the importance of CSE in school and a willingness to be trained and then a strong motivation to teach CSE in their lessons (Ang & Lee, 2017; Bruno et al., 2024; Klein, 2021). Global comparisons emphasize the need for training and investments to increase knowledge and skills regarding CSE in schools and to research new teacher and educator training models (UNESCO, 2021; 2023).

The urge and need for training aligns with the UNI-T project launched as a collaborative initiative within the CIVIS alliance, a European universities' network that aims at enhancing teacher training and education through innovative, international, and practical approaches. Specifically, CSE training would align with Work Package 2 (WP2), which focuses on developing and implementing blended learning modules (BLMs) designed for pre-service and in-service teachers. The BLMs foster collaboration between educators or teachers and institutions locally and internationally, enabling several mobility mechanisms within the UNI-T project, including physical and virtual formats, creating a hybrid instructional approach that maximizes flexibility, accessibility, and resource optimization (Graham et al., 2003). Furthermore, it fosters more profound learning and the development of critical competencies (Coyle et al., 2019). UNI-T project works through four strategies: (1) developing hybrid learning modules based on literature and exchanges between participants; (2) providing webinars and summer schools to encourage transnational and intercultural dialogues with different educational actors, such as schools, universities, and educational institutions; (3) emphasizing transnational action research projects bringing together teachers and educational actors with researchers; and (4) offering a transversal approach to the mobility of students, in-service and pre-service teachers and educators, including open badge recognition systems.

In 2025, the project will introduce a course dedicated to CSE for the first time. Specifically, the Sexuality Education Training for Teachers and Educators (SETTE) course. This pilot teacher training will focus initially on Italian in-service educators and teachers, offering an opportunity for mobility within the national context and online exchanges of knowledge, experiences, and practices among participants. The decision to begin with Italian educators and teachers is due to the legal, educational, cultural, and social differences among the countries involved in the UNI-T project. Hence, this training aims to fill a training gap in responding to the teachers' needs, providing collaboration and mobility opportunities between teachers of Italian schools to increase their knowledge and skills about CSE implementation.

2. Design

The SETTE course follows CIVIS's recommendation, integrating international guidelines for CSE teacher training. Specifically, the Plan International documents (2020a; 2020b; 2020c) recommend a maximum of 5 days of training on several topics regarding individuals' sexuality. The SETTE course provides seven training modules respecting the Standard for the European Union (WHO & BZgA, 2010) regarding the topic to discuss in CSE and from the cited recommendations.

Using BLMs, the SETTE course provides a first meeting divided into two in-person sessions. Then, it offers an autonomous study on the CIVIS platform, where participants will find materials and references. Each module will indeed provide a full package with PowerPoint presentations and additional references material to explore the specific topic in greater depth, including a summary of activities or materials that can be implemented in schools, divided for different ages, as well as videos, online references, or book recommendations. To monitor the training, at the end of each module, there will be self-assessment questions on knowledge, expectations, and reflections regarding the module. An intermediate online meeting will allow discussion about critical questions raised from the training during the individual study. To those who want to explore the contents and increase their knowledge of the Italian context, it will be possible to download the package in English. However, some steps of this pilot teachers' and educators' training are exclusively in Italian. Those are the two days of face-to-face meetings, the middle course online meeting, and the online final questionnaire.

Below is a brief description of the topics that the modules will address.

- Definition of CSE, educational and training standards, application methodologies, strategies, materials, and sexual rights; general practical implications: methodological approach of the teacher or educator, reference bibliography, creation, and use of a support network.
- Emotions, feelings, and relationships – intimate, friendly, relative, and other relational relationships – and types of families: dual-parent, single-parent, same-sex parent families
- Sexual identity, physical and sexual development, gender stereotypes and gender-based violence, consent and respect; additionally, socio-cultural influences and values such as sexuality and religion, consequences of pornography abuse, and cultural transmission of stereotypes.
- Inclusion and visibility of diversity; contraception, reproduction, and sexually transmitted infections/diseases.

2.1. Objectives

The SETTE course aims to fill a critical gap in Italian teachers' and educators' training, enhancing teachers' and educators' technical competencies and fostering a reflective approach that is essential when addressing complex and sensitive subjects like sexuality. By covering several topics, the course promotes inclusivity, aligning with recent calls for educational and training programs that support social cohesion and equality (Jiménez-Ríos et al., 2023); it aims to increase knowledge of CSE, enhance educational skills

regarding the topic, and promote positive and respectful attitudes, as well as critical reflection. The approach utilized will focus on sexual rights (WAS, 2014), specifically on number 10 – the right to have a sexuality education – aiming to promote rights’ protection in the school context while ensuring safe and healthy sexual development for everyone. Furthermore, by providing new teacher and educator training on sexuality education, the SETTE course aims to the goals number 3 (Good health and well-being), 4 (Quality education), and 5 (Gender equality) of the 2030 Agenda, emphasizing the role of educators in fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future (IPPF, 2016; UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2023).

2.2. Methods

Participants will enroll in the SETTE course by answering a brief online registration form. To permit everyone to be part of a significant experience, the course will have a maximum number of participants. The course will open to a maximum of 50 in-service teachers or educators to allow everyone to participate actively and collaboratively.

The SETTE course is divided into seven modules. Below is a brief description of the course.

The first two in-person sessions – one on a Friday morning and one the following Saturday – will introduce the Sexuality Education concept, definitions, and the three known approaches. Beginning with the separation of sexuality from the idea that it is just sexual intercourse, the course will address methodologies, strategies, and materials for future CSE implementation, sharing opinions and experiences or transversal practices applicable even to sexual topics. Lastly, school planning for interventions, projects, or lessons on CSE topics will be discussed.

The course will continue online for the remaining six modules with more independent learning. Specifically, the second module will discuss consent and relationship topics, addressing the school and classroom context by describing the phenomena of violence and discrimination regarding sexuality, like homophobia, transphobia, bullying, gender stereotypes, and sexual and gender violence. Finally, the topic of online sexual activities will be addressed, with a specific focus on sexting, which has become increasingly popular among younger people in recent years. The third module will cover physical and sexual development, childhood sexual behaviors, emotions, and self-determination. The fourth module will specifically address sexual identity with its four components – assigned sex at birth, gender identity, sexual and romantic orientation, and gender expression – and its development, discussing also stereotypes, sexual stigma, heterosexism, and social heteronormativity.

There will be an online meeting between the fourth and fifth modules to discuss the topics covered until then. The course will continue as previously – online and autonomously – with the fifth module focusing on adolescence and adulthood, sexual pleasure and sexual dysfunctions, and desire. The sixth module will specifically address the theme of visibility, not inclusion, because it will offer training regarding the sexuality of people that society includes but does not see or does not consider. Consequently, this module will cover disability, third age, and the importance of broad language according to the various sexual identities. The seventh and last module will conclude the training by covering contraception, sexually transmitted infections and diseases, and voluntary termination of pregnancy. The decision to discuss these medical aspects at the end of the training is due to the refusal to categorize sexuality education solely as the prevention of risks and negative consequences of sexual relations and intercourse; by doing so, the SETTE course considers all the topics addressed equally important, while at the same time trying to combat stereotypes and beliefs related to sexuality.

At the end of the training, a final assessment questionnaire with closed and open questions will be administered. The course is completed when all modules and the final questionnaire have been properly completed.

3. Conclusions

In Italy, CSE teacher training is often left to the individual's discretion; teachers and educators choose to enroll in training through external professional courses or academic studies and then to include and address CSE topics in their educational activities in school. To develop future shareable, replicable, and culture-based CSE teacher training programs, it is necessary to focus on increasing the implementation and assessment of teacher and educator training designs. While for some CSE means teaching sensitive and challenging topics, for many it is necessary to develop crucial skills for daily life. CSE has three objectives: to increase and improve knowledge by imparting information and skills, enabling recipients to apply their knowledge, and finally, positive attitudes, helping develop a respectful self and other view. The SETTE course, therefore, contributes to an important paradigm shift, positioning sexuality education within a framework of human rights and digital literacy, both vital in contemporary education (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). Within the UNI-T project, the SETTE course benefits teachers and educators and aligns with broader recommendations that advocate for CSE in schools. Further research is encouraged to explore the long-term impacts on teachers, educators, and student attitudes, as well as the potential of the SETTE model to support a rights-oriented education.

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