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Researching youth voices on Comprehensive Sexuality Education: A literature review of qualitative studies

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Voci e prospettive dei giovani riguardo l'Educazione Sessuale Integrata. Una revisione della letteratura qualitativa

The past decades have seen an increase in the design and implementation of sexuality education programs deemed comprehensive within formal schooling. Qualitative research is gaining relevance in the field; however, few studies focus on youth perspectives. This study analyzes qualitative research through a literature review on the implementation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programs from the perspective of young people. A review of qualitative studies and a meta-synthesis were conducted to outline a state-of-the-art of qualitative research on youth perceptions of CSE. Results point to two main areas of concern for youth: contents and pedagogy. There remains a general dissatisfaction over the depth and breadth of the CSE curriculum, leaving young people feeling unprepared for positive relationships and good sexual health. In terms of pedagogy, there is still a shortfall in the effective implementation of innovative teaching and learning strategies, pointing towards a gap regarding the pedagogical frameworks underlying CSE.

Negli ultimi decenni si è assistito a un aumento della progettazione e implementazione di programmi di educazione alla sessualità con un approccio olistico in ambito scolastico. La ricerca qualitativa sta acquisendo importanza in questo campo; tuttavia, pochi studi si concentrano sulle prospettive di adolescenti e giovani. Questo studio analizza la ricerca qualitativa attraverso una revisione della letteratura sull'attuazione dei programmi di Educazione Sessuale Integrata (ESI) dal punto di vista dei giovani. È stata condotta una revisione degli studi qualitativi e una metasintesi per delineare lo stato dell'arte della ricerca qualitativa sulla percezione dell'ESI da parte dei giovani. I risultati indicano due aree principali di preoccupazione rilevate dai partecipanti: i contenuti e l'approccio pedagogico. Permane una generale insoddisfazione circa la profondità e l'ampiezza del programma di studi ESI, che lascia ragazzi e ragazze impreparati ad affrontare in chiave positiva questioni connesse alle relazioni e alla salute sessuale. Sul piano pedagogico, si riscontra ancora una carenza nell'attuazione efficace di strategie innovative di insegnamento e apprendimento, evidenziando una lacuna per quanto riguarda i quadri pedagogici alla base dell'ESI.

Keywords: Comprehensive Sexuality Education; Youth voices; Critical pedagogy; Qualitative methods; Inclusive education.

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1. Introduction & conceptual framework

Despite the clear evidence of the advantages of high-quality, curriculum-based Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), nowadays few children and young people receive adequate preparation that fosters their agency to make informed decisions about their sexuality and relationships freely and responsibly (UNESCO, 2018). CSE is still far from being institutionalised worldwide, particularly in the majority of low and middle-income countries (UNESCO, 2014), drawing increased attention in global education discourse.

Compulsory sexuality education (SE) within formal and non-formal schooling was first addressed as a fundamental need within the global community at the International Conference on Population and Development's (ICPD) Program of Action in Cairo, in 1994. Since then, international organisations have reiterated the need for CSE as a basic human right and emphasised its benefits as an essential tool to advance gender equality and sustainable development (IPPF, 2010; UNESCO, 2018; UNFPA & BZgA, 2017). Indeed, CSE crosses several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Good Health and Wellbeing (SDG3), Quality Education (SDG4), and Gender Equality (SDG5), representing a key area for empowerment-based action.

CSE has been framed in the global discourse mainly through the United Nations' (UN) ongoing advocacy for its implementation, as well as support from international organisations like IPPF (International Planned Parenthood Federation). The latter has been a crucial for setting the CSE agenda by positioning it as a key action for the promotion of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR). They are behind, for example, the creation of the broadly used international policy resource for CSE curriculum development *"It's All One Curriculum: Guidelines and Activities for a Unified Approach to Sexuality, Gender, HIV, and Human Rights Education"* (International Sexuality and HIV Curriculum Working Group, 2009). With regards to the UN, CSE is located at the intersection of several of its main bodies' lines of action, i.e., UNESCO (Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), WHO (World Health Organisation), and UN Women, oftentimes co-producing reports with an international focus (global and regional). Some of the most notable include the International Technical Guidance on CSE (see UNESCO, 2018), the Global Status Report on CSE (see UNESCO, UNICEF, UNFPA, & WHO, 2021), and policy analyses of the challenges and opportunities of scaling up CSE policies (see UNESCO, 2014). The UNFPA has also sought to contribute with technical advice for countries worldwide and has worked vastly on producing evidence-based knowledge to argue, for example, for the advantages of delivering CSE in school-based settings (see UNFPA, 2017) as well as grounding the need for CSE on young people's needs in the context of different world regions (see UNFPA, 2019). Activities of other UN institutions like UNICEF (United Nations Children's Fund), UN Youth, and UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) also shape the CSE debate and its sociopolitical agenda.

The past decades have seen an increase in the design and implementation of sexuality education (SE) programs deemed *comprehensive* within formal schooling. Such programs shift from a prevention-based approach towards a rights-based approach, including elements such as positive sexualities and respectful relationships, young people's rights, participation and agency, and gender equality and power relations (Miedema, Le Mat, & Hague, 2020). Qualitative research is gaining relevance in the field; however, global efforts and academic scholarship have seldom paid sufficient attention to the perspectives and voices of youth regarding SE (Allen, 2007a, 2011; Jones, 2011; Le Mat, 2017).

It has been asserted that for CSE programs to be effective, they should be adapted to the local experiences of being young, responding to the interests and needs of young people (Aggleton & Campbell, 2000; Villa-Torres & Svanemyr, 2015). Additionally, seeing that little consideration has been given to what entails putting curriculum into practice and the power relations embedded (Aikman, Unterhalterl, & Challender, 2005), understanding and assessing youth perspectives, experiences, narratives and imaginaries of CSE is relevant and can provide valuable information regarding potential obstacles to CSE implementation.

This literature review draws from critical and feminist pedagogical theory (Freire, 1973/2021; hooks,[1] 1994), given their understanding of education as a space foster reflection and critical thinking in

1. "bell hooks", uncapitalized, is the pseudonym of Gloria Jean Watkins (1952–2021).

order to address oppressive social norms and structures. This constitutes a basic premise of CSE, which is based on encouraging critical understandings of gender norms and stereotypes, power relations, and SRHR, among other key elements. These characteristics become ideal for exploring, analysing, and understanding SE from a comprehensive viewpoint as experienced by young learners, both in relation to pedagogical practice and program contents.

Critical and feminist pedagogy also enlightens the exploration of CSE in its potential to facilitate learners' critical thinking skills for social transformation and reveals the importance of a dialogical and engaged pedagogy in its implementation. Furthermore, there has been an acknowledgement of the components of critical pedagogy in SE in the form of dialogue, critique, and praxis (Sanjakdar, Allen, Rasmussen, Quinlivan, Brömdal, & Aspin, 2015). Such elements can facilitate attitude changes towards sexuality, gender, and power relations by providing space for young people to understand the construction of social norms, thereby equipping them with the skills to critically reflect upon them.

This framework guides the inquiry about the application and significance of critical pedagogy as experienced and perceived by young people within their CSE classes, providing valuable tools to interpret key themes that stem from the current research topic.

2. Methodology

This paper aims to analyse and summarise the contributions of qualitative research through a literature review, identifying the main themes addressed through a meta-synthesis. The research question that guides this review is: what are young people's perceptions regarding their experience undergoing school-based CSE programs?

To identify the relevant literature, specific search terms were used[2] as well as distinct inclusion and exclusion criteria[3] employing the ERIC database.[4] This search resulted in 823 records whose abstracts were screened for eligibility. 52 full-text articles were identified as relevant for the research question. The remaining 771 were not included because they did not provide data referring directly to young people's views, perceptions, or opinions about CSE. The full-text review resulted in further accuracy in the selection of evidence, excluding 19 articles due to lack of relevance, pure quantitative focus, or taking place pre-#metoo. In parallel six reports were included via hand search, that is, through an intentional selection of the researcher externally from the ERIC search given their relevance for the theme under inquiry. Such process led to a total of 39 studies included in the review, 33 through database search and six through hand-search. The time span post-#metoo was established with the intention of identifying SE programs that went beyond a risk-based approach, hypothesising this global movement encouraged the *comprehensive* feature of SE.

2. Definition of specific search terms:

   Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE):
   `(comprehensive sex* education) OR (Sex and Relationships Education) OR (empowerment sex* education) OR (gender sex* education) OR (rights sex* education) OR (social justice sex* education) OR (inclusi* sex* education) OR (wellbeing sex* education) OR (holistic sex* education) OR (life skills sex* education)`

   Youth:
   `Youth OR (Young People) OR teenager* OR teen* OR adolescent* OR (young adult*) OR student* OR pupil*`

   Voices:
   `voice* OR perception* OR view* OR experience* OR attitude* OR opinion* OR (expressed needs) OR (expressed attitudes of adolescents)`

3. Articles published between 2017 to 2022, peer-reviewed, in English, Spanish, French, excluding higher education, post-secondary education, early childhood education, preschool education, adult education, two-year colleges, kindergarten, adult basic education.

4. ERIC was identified as the best database for this research question given its specialisation on high quality, peer reviewed education sources. An initial comparative search using the same search terms in SCOPUS and EBSCO confirmed ERIC provided the most comprehensive results considering the specificity of the search criteria. Further databases were not included considering time and human resource limitations.

The findings section of each paper was screened by the author to locate and extract all data related to young people's perceptions about their school-based CSE. This evidence was subsequently synthesised and analysed inductively, leading to the emergence of specific themes to map out the data. Finally, data was summarised, analysed, and reported following the main categories that appeared throughout the search. No specific software was used.

Regarding the geographic location of the papers included in the review, the majority (28) come from English-speaking settings, mainly, the USA, the UK and Australia, with the remaining 11 studies from Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania, and Central America.[5] With reference to participant's ages, 25 studies solely focus on teens, with the youngest age included being 11-years-old and up to 19 in this group. 10 studies range from teenage years up to the 20's, while four include an age spectrum from the late teens up to early, mid, and late 30's. In total, 14-years-old appears as the most represented age (in 21 studies).

3. Findings

What are young people saying about the CSE they receive? Evidence from the literature shows that while young people want a truly comprehensive and egalitarian SE, what they receive is perceived as insufficient and inadequate, with a general dissatisfaction with the CSE curriculum (Alonso-Martínez, Fernández-Hawrylak, Heras-Sevilla, & Ortega-Sánchez, 2021; Grant & Nash, 2019; Lucero, Hanafi, Emerson, Rodriguez, Davalos, & Grinnellet, 2020; Marshall, Hudson, & Stigar, 2020; Namukonda, Rosen, Simataa, Chibuye, Mbizvo, & Kangale, 2021; Ritchwood, Luque, Coakley, Wynn, & Corbie-Smith, 2020; Thianthai, 2019; Unis & Sällström, 2020). They describe feeling unprepared for positive relationships and good sexual health, claiming they deserve to know everything, they are not too young to learn about sexuality, and that no topic is inappropriate for their age, in this case, 10th and 11th graders (Thin Zaw, McNeil, Liabsuetrakul, & Htay, 2021).

An analysis of the findings throughout the selected literature can be grouped into two main areas: opinions about the curricular contents delivered, and references to the pedagogical process of how such content is being taught.

3.1. Contents: biology is not enough! A call for sex-positive education

The literature outlines an unbalanced focus of CSE in favour of biology and anatomy to the detriment of a holistic perspective which includes the broader context of romantic relationships. According to young people, learning about biological aspects is not enough, demanding the inclusion of social, psychological, and emotional aspects (Alonso-Martínez *et al.*, 2021; Bradford, DeWitt, Decker, Berg, Spencer, & Ross, 2019; Formby & Donovan, 2020; Grant & Nash, 2019; Laverty, Noble, Pucci, & MacLean, 2021; Lucero *et al.*, 2020; Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021) such as more knowledge about healthy sexual relationships, respect for rights and duties, and in general information that is richer in inclusivity, relevance and depth (Heslop, Burns, & Lobo, 2019; Narushima *et al.*, 2020). CSE is perceived as teaching facts without tackling the emotions involved, while young people desire more discussions about feelings, and skills to appropriately manage their emotions (Araúz Ledezma, Massar, & Kok, 2020). Furthermore, they perceive that learning about what constitutes healthy relationships and/or sexual encounters beyond the mechanical aspects would allow them to establish their own boundaries and rules about what they will accept or not within a relationship (Formby & Donovan, 2020).

This relates to the call for a more sex-positive approach to SE (Jørgensen, Weckesser, Turner, & Wade, 2019; Roberts *et al.*, 2020). Young people assert that CSE overfocuses on prevention and risk behaviours over sexual wellbeing (Bradford *et al.*, 2019; Lucero *et al.*, 2020), calling for the inclusion of areas such as pleasure, mental health, and wellbeing in general (Hobaica, Schofield, & Kwon, 2019; Laverty *et al.*, 2021; Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021). They also mention the absence of discussion on masturbation, potentially reproducing taboos and shame around this subject (Patterson *et al.*, 2020).

5. Total studies reviewed per-country are: USA (12), the UK (7) Australia (5), Scotland (2), Canada (2), Austria (1), Portugal (1), Sweden (1), Myanmar (1), Thailand (1), Bangladesh (1), Zambia (1), Malawi (1), South Africa (1), Samoa (1), and Panama (1).

3.2. Contents: the issue of power dynamics and consent

Students feel ill-equipped to pursue healthy dating relationships and lack realistic role models for healthy romantic relationships (Alonso-Martínez *et al.*, 2021; Marshall *et al.*, 2020; Unis & Sällström, 2020), consequently calling for more discussions on healthy (and unhealthy) relationships. Many identify abusive behaviours between peers in dating relationships (Marshall *et al.*, 2020), underlining the importance of addressing issues of power and control.

Talking about consent is also a crucial concern for students (Lucero *et al.*, 2020; Marshall *et al.*, 2020). Being provided with legal definitions or ideal standards of consent doesn't help as they claim such abstract definitions lack connection to the complexities of their everyday life (Hirsch, Khan, Wamboldt, & Mellins, 2019, as cited in Setty, 2021). In this vein, young people often see consent as a burden, a complexity simplified through minimum standards of agreement (Setty, 2021). This shows a limited understanding of acceptable behaviours in dating and relationship contexts, and relates to young people's need to ground consent on topics relevant to them (*sexting*, for instance), hence engaging with the situated realities of contemporary youth sexual cultures (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2019) and providing them with useful skillsets to safely navigate consent. Addressing consent in a grounded and practical manner, such as teaching students to recognise the relevance of both verbal and non-verbal ways to express it, is paramount for youth wellbeing (Formby & Donovan, 2020), especially considering that young people's limited education surrounding safe practices in the realm of sexuality can often lead to engagement in non-consensual and unsafe experiences (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017).

Furthermore, students identify the importance of normalising the discourse around SE and its diverse concepts (Lucero *et al.*, 2020), as learning to talk about sex makes it easier for them to identify problematic behaviours and consequently ask for help (Unis & Sällström, 2020). This aligns with the evidence that young people feel discomfort using terminology around sexuality (Rose *et al.*, 2019), highlighting the importance of "learning" how to speak, rehearsing "talk" around sex, love, consent, help, protection and power (Formby & Donovan, 2020).

3.3. Contents: CSE is heteronormative. A call for inclusion and a whole-school approach

The heteronormativity of CSE emerges as a substantial issue highlighted by youth, describing it as non-inclusive and lacking LGBTQ+ content (Bradford *et al.*, 2019; Currin, Hubach, & Croff, 2020; Ezer, Kerr, Fisher, Waling, Bellamy, & Lucke, 2020; Formby & Donovan, 2020; Grant & Nash, 2019; Hobaica *et al.*, 2019; Hobaica & Kwon, 2017; Lucero *et al.*, 2020; Marshall *et al.*, 2020; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Paechter, Toft, & Carlile, 2021; Patterson *et al.*, 2020; Roberts *et al.*, 2020). This makes young people feel invisible, creates a sense of exclusion for individuals that do not adhere to a heteronormative approach, and makes their experience undergoing SE lessons deeply uncomfortable (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017).

LGBTQ+ students describe feeling particularly unprepared for sex and relationships due to the narrow content received (Hobaica *et al.*, 2019; Patterson *et al.*, 2020), posing safety concerns for health-related issues as this population would be more vulnerable to harmful sexual health consequences (Paechter *et al.*, 2021), risky sexual behaviours and sexual violence (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). This also raises mental health concerns, as being "othered" by this exclusion can spark feelings of anxiety, depression and even suicidality (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017).

Homosexuality is perceived as stigmatised content because of its consistent omission within CSE (Heslop *et al.*, 2019; Roberts *et al.*, 2020; Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021), while young people view it as a natural experience in human sexuality they wish would be discussed in greater depth, along with other LGBTQ+ topics like identity development and transgender identities (Bradford *et al.*, 2019; Hobaica *et al.*, 2019; Jarpe-Ratner, 2020).

Consequently, evidence from the literature indicates a desire among young people for CSE to be more inclusive overall by becoming sensitive to all sexual and gender identities and providing diversity of representation (Hobaica *et al.*, 2019; Laverty *et al.*, 2021). Nevertheless, they warn how schools must be careful when addressing gender identity and sexual orientation in a combined way as it can be perceived as problematic to discuss gender together with sex and sexuality contents. In their study about

the experiences of non-binary teenagers in school, Paechter and colleagues (2021) demonstrate how non-binary students wish there was more information on non-binary identities and binary trans identities, but separated from discussions on "having sex" (Paechter *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, students perceive that conversations about identities should be mainstreamed across the curriculum, rather than confined to the SE realm.

CSE's heteronormativity also has implications for LGBTQ+ students' learning about gender-based violence. Evidence from the literature suggests that in the few cases when CSE includes discussions about violence and abuse, it is primarily addressed as a heterosexual problematic, that is, centred on physical violence and reduced to men as perpetrators (Formby & Donovan, 2020). Nevertheless, young people recognise gender-based violence is relevant to everybody's lives, noting that failing to provide all students with the resources to identify and contend with potentially abusive relationships dismisses significant learning opportunities (Formby & Donovan, 2020).

Moving away from a heteronormative approach in CSE is adamant if we consider that schools continue to be deeply homophobic institutions (Pascoe, 2007, as cited in Santos, Marques da Silva, & Menezes, 2018) and that episodes of discrimination, bullying and violence still exist for LGBTQ+ identities (Santos *et al.*, 2018). Moreover, young people acknowledge schools tend to disengage from their responsibility of dealing with violence and discrimination in the context of students' sexuality (Santos *et al.*, 2018). This demonstrates how youth perceive schools as homophobic both when they enact a "passive" approach (omission or lack of inclusion) as well as when there are "active" episodes of discrimination (Formby & Donovan, 2020).

3.4. Contents: CSE lacks context-sensitivity. A call for student sensitive CSE

Young people affirm CSE should be context sensitive, in contrast to a "one size fits all" approach (Ritchwood *et al.*, 2020), and should therefore take into account considerations which would ultimately make it "student-sensitive" (Hobaica *et al.*, 2019; Roberts *et al.*, 2020; Sell & Reiss, 2022) and tailored to the needs of each specific student group. This is crucial for the LGBTQ+ population who experience higher levels of depression, anxiety and suicide rates (Hobaica *et al.*, 2019), but becomes relevant for all students of diverse backgrounds in terms of class, race, ethnicity, disability, nationality, gender and sexual orientation (Santos *et al.*, 2018). For example, high quality faith-sensitive CSE appears to be valued by non-religious students because having a greater understanding and respect for *difference* and *diversity* would enable young people to gain tools to resist peer pressure (Johnson, Flentje, & Bartholomaeus, 2020; Sell & Reiss, 2022). Nevertheless it is important to note that religious teaching and faith-based schools often carry negative comments and perceptions in their approach to SE, mainly because it tends to promote abstinence-only approaches and is rooted in gender stereotypes (Ezer *et al.*, 2020; Waling, Bellamy, Ezer, Kerr, Lucke, & Fisher, 2020). For example, evidence from a study including students with Muslim, Catholic and Christian backgrounds found that female students expressed having feelings of guilt in relation to sex before marriage, while male students did not, impacting negatively on young girls' sexual wellbeing socially as well as psychologically (Narushima *et al.*, 2020).

3.5. Pedagogy: Who should teach CSE? Adultcentrism and teacher effectiveness

Moving on to the pedagogical realm, a theme that appears transversally in students' opinions is the perception of CSE as adultcentric (Setty, 2021), that is, following the logic that young people (passive) absorb information from adults (experts) and consequently change their behaviours. This model lacks resonance with youth because they see adults as disconnected from their needs and realities, and hence perceive lessons as not relevant or adjusted to their reality (Unis & Sällström, 2020). The role of the teacher is therefore crucial for the success or failure of any CSE intervention, impacting students' level of engagement, comfort, trustworthiness, and overall learning experience. Accordingly, teacher effectiveness emerges as a pivotal finding, evidencing most facilitators have had little or no specific training for the subject (Heslop *et al.*, 2019).

Students perceive a lack of proper teacher preparation which reflects on, for example, reticence, embarrassment, discomfort, lack of motivation, biases, and lack of connection with their concerns (Ezer *et al.*, 2020; Mayeza & Vincent, 2019; Namukonda *et al.*, 2021; Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021; Thianthai,

2019; Unis & Sällström, 2020). They report concealed meanings and messages being conveyed by their teachers, who often choose to withhold knowledge in order to transmit a normative, abstinence-based agenda (Currin *et al.*, 2020; Narushima *et al.*, 2020; Unis & Sällström, 2020). This use of scare tactics or fear-based messaging makes students feel guilty and ashamed for having engaged, wanting to engage, or even asking questions about sexuality, leaving them feeling unsupported, ill-informed and frustrated (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017; Laverty *et al.*, 2021; Waling *et al.*, 2020).

Young people want well trained professionals who are confident answering questions and teaching CSE (Hobaica *et al.*, 2019; Sell & Reiss, 2022). Hence, they often prefer and feel more comfortable with CSE being delivered by external providers rather than their own teachers (Brown & McQueen, 2020; Heslop *et al.*, 2019; Roberts *et al.*, 2020; Thin Zaw *et al.*, 2021; Waling *et al.*, 2020). In fact, students manifest their learning experiences with external experts are less biased and more inclusive and comfortable than lessons with their usual teachers (Waling *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, students attribute more credibility to external providers compared to facilitators from within the school system (Heslop *et al.*, 2019). Evidence from youth work on CSE provision has been positively valued by young people, who report, for example, feeling comfortable interacting and discussing LGBTQ+ relationships in informal settings with peer educators (Formby & Donovan, 2020).

Trustworthiness of the subject providing CSE is also relevant for young people: they perceive that without trust in the teacher, not much can be accomplished (Unis & Sällström, 2020), and report feeling concerned and uncertain about judging who to trust. Is it their own teachers or external providers? (Unis & Sällström, 2020). Familiarity with teachers thus appears as a double-edged sword. Young people prefer and appreciate peer educators and external professionals delivering CSE, but agree that teachers with whom they can trust their concerns should also be involved (Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021; Unis & Sällström, 2020).

This suggests young people would benefit from a mixed approach between schoolteachers and external providers. The World Health Organisation suggested already in 1996 that SE and the promotion of health in the formal school system should comprise collaborations with external providers (WHO, 1996) as well as support from the complete school community, as a whole-school approach suggests. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that young people perceive schools do not actively engage in efforts to expand the offer of educators and experts providing CSE beyond schoolteachers (Heslop *et al.*, 2019).

3.6. Pedagogy: How can a safe space be provided? The importance of school environment

Creating and managing an adequate classroom environment is crucial to youth, acknowledging the strong impact of classroom management skills and other students' attitudes on meaningful engagement in the CSE class (Laverty *et al.*, 2021; Rose *et al.*, 2019; Unis & Sällström, 2020; Waling *et al.*, 2020). Young people are concerned with how teachers handle students' behaviour, as peers are often perceived as immature and affect the learning environment of all students (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2019; Rose *et al.*, 2019). In fact, the way peers react to specific content impacts the learning process of all students, especially their meaning-making process for what is considered stigmatised or socially accepted (Laverty *et al.*, 2021).

This leads to young people's need for a safe space for learning, emphasising the importance of having a shame-and guilt-free channel for asking questions (Jarpe-Ratner, 2020; Laverty *et al.*, 2021; Thin Zaw *et al.*, 2021; Waling *et al.*, 2020). Here, their right to privacy and anonymity is essential (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2019; Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021), as well as the consistent option to abstain from participating in the lesson should they choose not to (Laverty *et al.*, 2021). Jars, boxes, or similar artifacts have proved to be valuable vessels through which students can anonymously voice concerns, especially considering the sensitive nature of SE topics which can spark feelings of vulnerability and anxiety (Renold, Ashton, & McGeeney, 2021; Rose *et al.*, 2019). Working explicitly on embarrassment and discomfort can be crucial for effective participation (Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021), especially in contexts with specific obstacles to anonymity, such as small towns where the notion that "everyone knows everyone" appears to transversally hinder CSE provision in general as well as access to information and sexual health services (Heslop *et al.*, 2019).

A final element contributing to a safe learning environment that is appreciated by students is establishing ground rules (Laverty *et al.*, 2021; Rose *et al.*, 2019). Initiating the class by clearly setting rules that promote dialogue, inclusivity, and tolerance gives students a sense of security that disrespect will not be accepted, allowing them to feel protected while exploring the concepts, feelings, and ideas present in CSE (Laverty *et al.*, 2021).

3.7. Pedagogy: Promoting critical thinking and active and fun learning

In line with the evidence that quality learning occurs when experiences settle according to each person's beliefs and views (Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021; Unis & Sällström, 2020), young people want more instances that promote critical thinking (Heard *et al.*, 2019; Johnson *et al.*, 2020). In fact, students viewed learning as being facilitated by actively taking part in group discussions, debates, and activities that foster reflection, helping them gain new perspectives and reflect on their own standpoints rather than receiving content in a factual way (Narushima *et al.*, 2020; Thianthai, 2019).

In addition to being provided with content that highlights a diversity of options and choices, they express enjoyment of spaces to reflect and "think hard" about themselves (Araúz Ledezma *et al.*, 2020), fostering autonomous and informed decision-making (Laverty *et al.*, 2021). They assert their enthusiasm about being able to voice their opinions through active learning and value having the space to critically explore issues such as sources of violence, the influence of cultural norms, and the effect of power relations on everyday life and behaviour (Araúz Ledezma *et al.*, 2020). This aligns with evidence that critical thinking and experiential learning can foster more self-efficacy for self-boundaries, values, and norm formation in relationship contexts (Unis & Sällström, 2020).

Students also clearly assert that they want to learn in fun and joyful ways (Johnson *et al.*, 2020; Waling *et al.*, 2020), showing appreciation for interactive and welcoming classes, friendly writing styles that are fun to read, and above all, groundedness on their real-life curiosity and relevance (Thianthai, 2019). Specifically, they request the use of more visual and tangible material (Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021; Thianthai, 2019) such as films, animated videos, vignettes, pictures, and informative graphics, as well as lessons that involve them meaningfully through student presentations or portfolios on specific themes with independent research (Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021). Changes in the learning setting are also motivating, such as insightful field visits to clinics (Decker, Dandekar, Gutmann-Gonzalez, & Brindis, 2021; Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021). Likewise, evidence from arts-based CSE projects has had positive feedback from young people, where teaching through creativity is considered unique and captivating, and associated with a more informal learning context (Formby & Donovan, 2020).

3.8. Pedagogy: To gender-segregate or not to gender-segregate? Looking into CSE format

Evidence shows that gender affects both teachers' and students' level of comfort within the CSE class, both in terms of teacher-student gender dissonance and student composition of the classroom field (Rose *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, young people often prefer gender-separated classes (Brown & McQueen, 2020; Jørgensen *et al.*, 2019; Likupe, Chintsanya, Magadi, Munthali, & Makwemba, 2021; Thin Zaw *et al.*, 2021) acknowledging however the importance that all students receive the same content (Waling *et al.*, 2020). Students also report a preference for same-gender teachers (Brown & McQueen, 2020; Likupe *et al.*, 2021; Thin Zaw *et al.*, 2021), arguing it affects not only student comfort but also teacher comfort toward the student group (Rose *et al.*, 2019). Although this can be interpreted as an opportunity to improve young people's learning experiences in CSE, a binary categorisation of gender could be problematic for transgender and non-binary students, threatening the ability of CSE's agenda to become LGBTQ+ inclusive (Haley, Tordoff, Kantor, Crouch, & Ahrens, 2019; Paechter *et al.*, 2021).

Defining a suitable timing for CSE's contents also emerged as a key finding across the literature. It has been demonstrated that CSE should be age-specific (Lucero *et al.*, 2020; Unis & Sällström, 2020) and start from a young age (Hobaica *et al.*, 2019), however, oftentimes students express that timing is not well aligned with their current needs, experiences, and developmental stage (Laverty *et al.*, 2021; Waling *et al.*, 2020). For instance, some content is perceived as being taught too late (puberty), while

other too early (condom use and STI risks) (Waling *et al.*, 2020). When content does not align with timing, young people feel that it is either repetitive or pointless (Laverty *et al.*, 2021).

Insufficient frequency, sufficiency, and duration of CSE interventions were also voiced as a concern for young people, who assert that CSE should be threaded throughout the school curriculum providing ongoing opportunities to learn (Laverty *et al.*, 2021; Rose *et al.*, 2019). They value CSE taught in a spiral curriculum through regular lessons rather than single, off-timetable days (Sell & Reiss, 2022) and perceive they are more likely to forget if information is disassociated from reality or not repeated often enough (Seiler-Ramadas *et al.*, 2021). The more often they receive it, the more they learn, thus their assertion of the need for more CSE (Ezer *et al.*, 2020) and coverage of topics across different subjects to allow them to explore themes in a deeper manner (Waling *et al.*, 2020).

4. Discussion & conclusion

This literature review provides an up-to-date analytical synthesis of the most recent qualitative research regarding young people's perceptions of school-based CSE. Overall, it can be observed that while SE has conceptually transformed from a prevention-based approach towards a rights-based model, a dissonance persists between the ambitious CSE curricula and their empirical application in the classroom.

Students' call for a less risk-based perspective in CSE in favour of sex-positivity underlines that SE remains embedded within normative notions of how young people "should" behave, stressing their need and appreciation for transmission of content in a judgment-free manner (Heslop *et al.*, 2019). This is particularly relevant considering that the abstinence-only model continues to prevail in many contexts (Currin *et al.*, 2020; Lesko, 2010; Narushima *et al.*, 2020), and young people report ongoing use of scare and shame strategies to dissuade them from having sex (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). Young people are clear: SE must be based on the premise that sex is normal in adolescence (Thianthai, 2019), and be evidence-based and comprehensive instead of dependent on educators' particular belief systems (Laverty *et al.*, 2021). Effectively integrating a sex-positive outlook means providing a more holistic perspective regarding human relationships, which, for them, means speaking about *well-being* in terms of sexuality, mental health, and relationships, as well as addressing the dimensions of pleasure and emotions. Incorporating talk about healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent, power, and control ultimately means talking about love - ideally in a gender-inclusive way - providing students with the skills to identify and prevent situations of violence and abuse.

CSE's shortfall of becoming truly student-sensitive, that is, a space where the backgrounds, identities, and needs of all groups are valued, also emerged as a key finding. This lack of context-sensitivity relates to variables like culture, religion, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and disability, among others, however, it is more strongly asserted towards gender identity and sexual minorities. A heteronormative model continues to linger in CSE, excluding student populations that are at higher risk of both physical and mental distress. Furthermore, since addressing or omitting certain contents will shape young people's perceptions of what is considered "normal" in the realm of sexuality and relationships (Laverty *et al.*, 2021), strengthening the inclusion component would enrich the experience of students not adhering to the heteronormative model, as well as heterosexual students by normalising and giving visibility to all identities. Inclusive SE would bring improved outcomes for mental health and overall youth well-being by preventing non-consensual experiences and encouraging self-esteem, a sense of community, resilience and understanding of what constitutes healthy and safe romantic relationships (Hobaica & Kwon, 2017). As a result, schools would continue to move towards becoming a space where equality and non-discrimination predominate, two key premises of democratic education that are still far from being adopted across educational institutions (Santos *et al.*, 2018).

The literature also shows how adopting a pedagogical model grounded in critical thinking, reflection, and engaging teaching and learning methods is crucial for CSE effectiveness. Young people call for the consistent integration of innovative teaching strategies throughout the curriculum as these techniques have demonstrated increased engagement and positively impacted their learning experiences. Making learning "fun" means not only overcoming the adultcentric model under a logic of adult–expert versus student–passive through the inclusion of innovative and diversified types of teaching and learning methods, but above all transforming their subjective agency towards a recognition of youth as legitimate

sexual subjects (Allen, 2007b). Such an approach overcomes the idea of static knowledge waiting to be lineally trespassed from one actor to the other (*taught* by the teacher and *learned* by the student) but rather knowledge as being dynamically constructed (Gacoin, 2016). In the same vein, it provides young people with the tools to critically reflect and develop their own personal beliefs, making the CSE classroom a space where youth can actively exert their agency in producing meanings and questioning norms related to sexuality and gender (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020; Ngabaza & Shefer, 2019). Grounding CSE in critical pedagogies gains even more importance if we consider that most young people will eventually resort to other sources of information beyond the classroom (Formby & Donovan, 2020; Grant & Nash, 2019; Haley *et al.*, 2019; Hobaica & Kwon, 2017; Laverty *et al.*, 2021; Patterson *et al.*, 2020; Unis & Sällström, 2020; Waling *et al.*, 2020), making the case for a pedagogical model which includes not only digital literacy but a norm-critical perspective which engages both teachers and students to critically reflect about the power structures in society (Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020; Bredström, Bolander, & Bengtsson, 2018; Formby & Donovan, 2020).

Working towards a whole-school approach in CSE (Vanwesenbeeck, Westeneng, De Boer, Reinders, & Van Zorge, 2016) could be helpful in addressing several problems that emerged as findings from this literature review. Firstly, it would allow schools to provide multiple and diversified learning opportunities on CSE-related topics across school subjects (Jørgensen *et al.*, 2019), generating a sort of "CSE mainstreaming" across the institution in a coherent and holistic manner. This would involve both formal and informal curriculum, and also include school staff, parents, and the broader school community, therefore, creating and encouraging an *ethos* grounded on challenging binary social norms (Paechter *et al.*, 2021), as well as heteronormative, adultcentric, sexist and other potential discriminatory beliefs. Furthermore, a whole-school approach becomes fundamental for the pressing need to overcome heteronormativity within SE. Considering schools are deeply binary institutions (Bragg, Renold, Ringrose, & Jackson, 2018, as cited in Paechter *et al.*, 2021), most if not all gender non-conforming students voice the need (or burden) to educate not only their student peers but also teachers, parents and other school staff about gender identity in order to make schools a safer space for them (Paechter *et al.*, 2021). This is relevant because even when institutions intend to be more inclusive, for instance, by providing support groups for students through "LGBTQ+ clubs", these are not used because of fear of being outed, discriminated against, or bullied. Such is the paradox of providing support for students who often feel underrepresented and invisible in school, but who will become hyper-visible within these spaces. A whole-school approach could reduce the perception of these spaces as threatening and instead serve their original purpose of providing an inclusive, safe space while also creating community. Additionally, it would take the burden off LGBTQ+ students to educate both themselves and other school community members, especially considering the vulnerable process of coming out (Paechter *et al.*, 2021).

In conclusion, findings from this literature review provide valuable insights regarding current limitations and challenges for CSE, where young people assert their want and need for CSE to be sex-positive, inclusive, and relevant for their needs by addressing relationships, consent, and overall youth wellbeing from a credible and non-judgmental source. Students want to be considered legitimate sexual subjects with the ability to gain critical thinking skills and make mindful, informed decisions about their own wellbeing, and for this to take place CSE must be taught by sources that inspire credibility and foster the creation and management of safe spaces for learning. First and foremost, it is important for schools to acknowledge that sexuality and relationships are particular subjects with unique challenges and thus address them accordingly, overcoming adultcentric, heteronormative, and gendered models as applied to both content and pedagogy. Finally, this review has made it possible to identify an important gap regarding the pedagogical models and theories underlying CSE, calling for further exploration and analysis of the pedagogical frameworks of CSE to provide possible orientations for a more responsive and participatory implementation of CSE.

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