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**Age-appropriate sexuality and gender education in infant and primary schools. Approaches and attitudes.**

**Docente relatore: Prof. MARTIN DODMAN**

**Studentessa: CORALIE DARBELLEY**

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## Introduction

Questions concerning sexuality and gender have gradually come to be seen very important in all societies in recent decades. As a result, an increasing body of literature has been devoted to the need for education to include these issues for children of all ages.

Sex, as related to biological differences between males and females in terms of primary and secondary sexual characteristics and reproductive functions has generally been taught as a topic in the primary school science curriculum. However, there has been increasing recognition that human sexuality is a part of overall physical and psychical questions concerning relationships, the development of bonds and experiencing pleasure, as well as reproduction. Therefore, in several countries, sexuality has come to be dealt with as part of a cross-curricular theme related to personal, social, health and emotional education.

Gender is a sociocultural construct based on sexual identity and sexual orientation both of which have historically been linked to the biological sex of a child at birth and led to norms defined in terms of heterosexual orientation and many other stereotypical characteristics, behaviours, and roles identified with masculinity or femininity. Recently, however, the idea that gender identity and gender expression must be determined by biological sexual characteristics and perpetuated through consolidated sociocultural norms has been increasingly challenged.

Within this perspective of change, how to define a comprehensive approach to sex and gender education (SGE) at infant and primary level is still a matter of debate and disagreement and a comparative study of educational systems in different continents and countries reveals considerable differences in terms of curricular guidelines and how such guidelines are interpreted in specific schools and by individual teachers.

The aim of this thesis is first to examine the rationale for and approaches to SGE as these are outlined in various international documents. There is then an

attempt to collect data to analyse the points of view of the two principal protagonists as regards SGE: pre-service and in-service teachers and parents.

Chapter 1 looks at how international documents deal with what has come to be defined as age-appropriate SGE should begin very early in childhood. Within these documents there is a consensus that learning about the cognitive, emotional, social, interactive, and physical aspects of human sexuality and relationships is necessary from infant school age. It is argued that children should progressively have information so they can build knowledge and develop values, in order to understand and express their own sexuality, behave responsibly in safe and empowering relationships, and challenge discriminatory and harmful gender norms and stereotypes.

Chapter 2 then illustrates research conducted to examine the question of individual beliefs, attitudes and actions as regards the principal protagonists of SGE. The aim is to consider these aspects with reference to the current situation in the Valle d'Aosta by collecting and analysing data from the points of view of parents with children of infant and primary school age; teachers with varying amounts of experience teaching in infant and primary schools; students who are undergoing pre-service teacher education and who will become infant and primary school teachers.

The analysis conducted was based on grounded theory and the development of categories for coding specific factors related to the points of view of the participants and their significance for approaches and attitudes to SGE. The categories that emerged were sociocultural factors, psychological factors, and didactic factors. The aim was to conduct a force-field analysis designed to identify facilitating and impeding factors for the development of SGE. The chapter ends with conclusions that identify some key themes to be addressed.

## Chapter 1: Overview and approaches to sexuality and gender education

Sexuality and Gender Education (SGE<sup>1</sup>) can be defined as a learning process concerning cognitive, emotional, social, interactive, and physical aspects of human sexuality (Bonjour & van der Vlugt, 2018), and how these are intimately linked to the question of gender as a sociocultural construct and the many stereotypical attitudes, behaviours, and roles associated with masculinity or femininity. The importance of beginning such education at an early age has become increasingly recognized, since, as Bhana (2016) states:

... the early years of primary schooling are a key site for the production and reproduction of gender and sexuality. [...] children are not blank innocent sheets on which gender and sexual patterns are stamped. Children are actively invested in gender and sexuality, and they do so by drawing on social and cultural resources to accommodate, negotiate and contest gender and sexual relations (p.2).

In recent years, many international documents have illustrated reasons for the importance of provision for SGE within the broad context of personal, social, health and emotional education. In 2010, the UN *Special Rapporteur on the Right to Education* stressed that “sexual education should be considered a right in itself and should be clearly linked with other rights in accordance with the principle of the interdependence and indivisibility of human rights” (p.7). This is also emphasized in the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, where it is also considered a prerequisite for the achievement of several of the other goals included in the agenda (UN, 2015). For the Council of Europe (2020), “sexuality education protects children and helps build a safer, inclusive society”.

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<sup>1</sup> Other terms frequently used, often interchangeably, but also at times reflecting different emphases in scope and emphases, are “Comprehensive Sexuality Education” or “Relationships and Sexuality Education”. I have chosen the term “Sexuality and Gender Education” to emphasize the inextricable relationship between these two components.

## 1.1 The rationale for SGE

SGE has increasingly been seen as a key component of learning at school both because of an increasing awareness of the consequences for individuals and societies in terms of risks and benefits related to the importance of sexuality and gender issues and in terms of changes in understanding child development as a process and meeting the needs of the developing child.

One important goal of SGE is to raise awareness about the range of problems that occur related to personal sexuality, unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted disease, sexual dependency, sexual violence, and sexual exploitation and which could at least in part be prevented by adequate and age-appropriate education.

Every year, at least 111 million new cases of curable sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and half of all new HIV infections occur among young people and up to 4.4 million girls aged 15–19 seek abortion – the majority of which are unsafe. Ten per cent of births worldwide are to adolescent mothers, who experience much higher rates of maternal mortality than older women. Rates of reported sexual abuse in 19 countries range from 7–34 per cent for girls and 3–29 per cent for boys. Every five minutes a young person commits suicide, often due to emotional and social problems related to sexual and reproductive health, such as sexual violence and the breakdown of relationships (IPFF, 2010, p.5).

A further goal is to promote the understanding and enjoyment of one's own sexuality, together with the understanding of what are safe, mutual, caring and fulfilling relationships both in terms of one's own body and those of other individuals. SGE teaches children and young people how to take responsibility for their own and other people's sexual health and wellbeing (WHO, 2010). This gradually provides learners with information concerning beliefs and values and it aims to equip children and young people with communication and decision-making

skills in sexuality, sexual health, and general wellbeing. In this way, children, adolescents, and adults as members of their communities can contribute to a compassionate and just society since they can better understand and manage their relationship with themselves and others.

Such goals are also related to the recognition of how our “gendered world” (Rippon, 2019) shapes everything, from social structures and educational policies to interpersonal relationships and questions of self-identity, wellbeing, and mental health. This has gradually created the perception of a need for formal educational agencies to take account of such questions in terms of curricular contents and teaching methodologies. It is now widely believed that these can no longer ignore questions related to sexuality and gender or assign passive roles to children who risk being disorientated within a world characterized by a tension between stereotypes which are often still dominant and opportunities to make choices to build one’s own identity and realize one’s own pathway in life (Vilkin et al., 2020).

At the same time, SGE has often been impeded by a lack of acceptance of the fact that important questions regarding sexuality already exist in early childhood and the belief that it can and should be left until later. However, in recent years an increasing amount of literature has shown how sexual development begins from birth and the ways in which, as they grow, babies, toddlers, infant and primary school children develop their sexuality both physically and emotionally (American Psychological Association, 2009). Exploring, experiencing, and feeling their own bodies as well as forming attachments to others are all part of this process. Early attachments are the basis for building relationships and developing intimacy for the rest of their lives. By the age of 2 or 3, children start to develop a sense of being a male or female, to perceive the difference between boys and girls and to identify themselves in terms of their biological sex. Moreover, they begin to associate certain behaviours with being male or female and thus questions related to gender identity and gender roles begin to emerge.

### **Child Sexual Development Ages 5-8**

By the age of six, most children will have shown an interest in how babies are made.

They will want to know how the egg and the sperm get together.

They are interested in pregnancy and birth.

Some children in this age group will be aware of the relationship between “making babies” and pleasure.

They are likely to hear stories about sex in the playground.

They will be aware of sexuality content in the media.

They usually know that some parts of the body are private, and that masturbating is a private thing.

Some children at the age of eight will show the first signs of puberty.

Some children will become aware that not everyone is heterosexual.

Some children have a growing awareness of sanctioned gender roles.

By age eight, children will be capable of a basic understanding of the process of human reproduction including the role of sexual intercourse.

Children usually know that looking at each other’s bodies and touching themselves are things people do in private.

Sex play may include kissing games and pretending to be married.

*Catching On Early – Sexuality Education for Victorian Primary Schools*, 2011, p.11.

Despite increasing awareness of childhood sexuality, some influential sectors of society and many parents may still wish to maintain an idea of children who are not yet and should not be sexual human beings. This can lead to attitudes such as “parents don’t want their children to be exposed to material which sexualises them” (The Christian Institute, 2016) or SGE is “an attack on the innocence of children” (Council of Europe, 2020). The presumed innocence of their children should be maintained for as long as possible, and they should not be forced to talk about sexuality within a range of topics related to human relationships and gender roles. Such an attitude fails to take account of the fact that children gather a great deal of information which adults ignore, or at least prefer to ignore, which

they get from a variety of sources such as websites and social media and which they exchange and develop in their everyday interactions. These sources have become easily accessible and extremely powerful, and they often communicate incorrect information and distorted behaviours and values related to sexuality (Bonjour & van der Vlugt, 2018). Consequently, this negatively influences the ways in which relationships begin to develop and are consolidated.

At the same time, even if the importance of SGE is recognized, both parents and teachers may feel inadequate because they consider themselves unable to interact with their children clearly and without embarrassment, or even to give correct and appropriate information concerning multiple questions related to sexuality and gender. For this reason, while underlining the importance of the part played by parents in their children's development, both in terms of giving information and acting as role models, all international organizations have increasingly emphasized the need to involve professionals in pedagogical, social, and physiological disciplines, to help schools provide SGE for children in order to furnish answers to questions and solutions to problems within this field and at the same time create the basis for collaboration between teachers and parents (WHO, 2010, IPPF, 2010, UN, 2015, UNESCO, 2018a).

## 1.2 The development of SGE

From an evolutionary and historical point of view, questions related to sexuality and gender have always existed. Behaviours and attitudes have constantly been socially constructed and learned through non-formal agencies such as families or informal agencies such as friendship or other kinds of relationships. The institution of formal educational agencies such as schools and the beginning of debates concerning sexuality and gender have only very gradually led to the introduction of some form of SGE in educational curricula.

At the same time, in all cultures, learning about sexuality and gender has been inevitably conditioned by prevailing socioeconomic conditions, customs, beliefs and lifestyles. This has largely led to ideas about sexuality and gender based

on imposition and oppression, suppression, and ignorance. Only recently awareness of a need for SGE has begun a process of radical change, moving from ideas based on normality to diversity, from intolerance to acceptance. In the same way, there has been a corresponding search for how to define what is “age-appropriate” SGE for children at infant and primary school. Since these developments still meet considerable opposition, many documents emphasize the need for assertive policy frameworks that combat ignorance, diminish fears, promote awareness, and equip schools with resources.

With challenges and resistance to sexuality education increasing, what is most needed is strong political leadership to remind society that access to comprehensive sexuality education is a human right and that it is for the benefit of all. Sexuality education is about knowing one’s rights and respecting other people’s rights, about protecting one’s health, and about adopting a positive attitude towards sexuality and relationships. It is also about acquiring valuable life skills, such as self-confidence, critical thinking, and the capacity to make informed decisions. There is obviously nothing wrong with this (Council of Europe, 2020).

In Europe, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, SGE developed in many diverse ways, at varying speeds and levels. In different contexts, individual teachers, or single schools, and gradually some school systems have developed new perspectives that have led to including SGE within curricula as part of an ongoing process of adapting to changes in ideas and behaviours. In 1955 Sweden became the first country to adopt SGE as part of educational policy, although it took several years before it was fully incorporated together with other school subjects in the curriculum. This was followed by Germany in 1968, Austria in 1970 and Switzerland and the Netherlands during the 1970s. France and the United Kingdom only began a process of introducing some form of SGE during the 1990s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many central and eastern European countries introduced SGE after the fall of communism, but principally with the aim of preparing young people for marriage and avoiding sexual relationships before then.

Estonia and the Czech Republic are the only countries which have introduced approaches to SGE based on ideas comparable to those in western Europe. Southern European countries, including Italy, still have no formal curricular provision for SGE in the school curriculum.

Over the past twenty years, several Scandinavian and western European countries, together with countries from other parts of the world such as Australia, have continued to develop SGE programmes that have gradually influenced each other in terms of approaches. This has led to an increasing body of research into more comprehensive ways of defining and delivering SGE. In 2010, the WHO published *Standards in Sexuality Education in Europe* (WHO, 2010) and in the same year UNESCO published the *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education*, including studies from all over the world. This document was revised and updated in 2018 (UNESCO, 2018a) and today provides perhaps the most complete overview of the types of contents that can be introduced and approaches that can be implemented.

As regards the contents of SGE, *Standards in Sexuality Education in Europe* identifies six age groups (0-4, 4-6, 6-9, 9-12, 12-15, 15-up) and states that:

... for all age groups the topics have been summarized under general themes: “The human body and human development”, “Fertility and reproduction”, “Sexuality”, “Emotions”, “Relationships and lifestyles”, “Sexuality, health and wellbeing”, “Sexuality and rights”, and “Social and cultural determinants of sexuality”. These themes have been chosen because they are relevant to the dynamic process of the physical, social and emotional sexual development of youth.

It is important to note that all topics should be addressed in an age-appropriate and developmental-appropriate way. For instance, in the age group (0-4), children should acquire the attitude “respect gender equality”. This seems farfetched for this young age group, but what is meant is the learning of the attitude that boys and girls are equal. It is important that these basic attitudes should be there from the beginning as a firm basis for later values and norms. At an early stage, the basics of a certain topic are introduced, at later

development stages the topics reoccur and will be consolidated (WHO, 2010, pp. 35-36).

The document also emphasizes the interdependence of knowledge/information, skills, and attitudes within the learning process.

Knowledge/information is understood to provide facts from the field of sexuality education in a balanced, comprehensive, age-appropriate way, such as development of the human body, reproduction, positive and negative aspects of sexuality, prevention of unintended pregnancy, STI and abuse. It is never scary or judgemental. It gives information about empowerment and sexual rights of children.

Skills are defined as the ability to show topic-related behaviour. Thus, skills refer to practicalities relating to the topics: what the learner should be able to do once learning has taken place. In sexuality education, this includes very different skills, such as how to communicate, how to negotiate, how to express one's feelings, how to handle unwanted situations. Also, it is important to have the skills required to use contraception and prevention against STI in an effective way and to ask for help in case of problems.

Attitudes are defined as internalized opinions and values related to the topics. Attitudes form the basic principles that guide our behaviour. It is the duty of the parent and the educator to give children and adolescents a firm basis through their own conduct. A young child needs to feel that he/she is safe, and that he/she is worthwhile, just like other people are worthwhile. With older children, parents and educators may strive to inspire respect for differences and, as the children grow into adolescents and young adults, that they have a responsibility towards themselves and others. Another important issue is to develop a positive attitude towards sexuality (p.33).

The contents proposed in the document *International technical guidance on sexuality education* (UNESCO, 2018a) are structured in terms of eight key concepts (“Relationships”, “Values, Rights, Culture and Sexuality”, “Understanding Gender”, “Violence and Staying Safe”, “Skills for Health and

Wellbeing”, “The Human Body and Development”, Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour”, Sexual and Reproductive Health”) that are directly linked to learning objectives. All these concepts are considered:

[...] equally important, mutually reinforcing and intended to be taught alongside one another. Topics are repeated multiple times with increasing complexity, building on previous learning using a spiral-curriculum approach. The key concepts are further delineated into two to five topics, each with key ideas and knowledge, attitudinal, and skill-based learning objectives per age group.

Knowledge provides a critical foundation for learners, while attitudes help young people shape their understanding of themselves, sexuality, and the world. At the same time, skills such as communication, listening, refusal, decision making and negotiation; interpersonal; critical thinking; building self-awareness; developing empathy; accessing reliable information or services; challenging stigma and discrimination; and advocating for rights, enable learners to take action.

These three domains of learning featured in the illustrative learning objectives – knowledge, attitudinal and skills building – are not necessarily linear, but rather reflect an iterative and mutually reinforcing process, providing learners with multiple opportunities to learn, revisit and reinforce key ideas (p.35).

### 1.3 Ways of delivering SGE

Initial approaches often saw SGE as a separate element in the curriculum, most commonly as a part of a biology programme dealing with the human body and with reproduction as a characteristic of humans as with all living beings. Gradually approaches then came to be based on teaching modules that dealt with various aspects of human relationships, including sexuality and gender, but which still tended to be “one-off” topics to be dealt with at some point in the curriculum.

Today there is now a widespread consensus that SGE should be integrated within whole school policies and practice as part of what is often called “Personal,

Social, Health and Emotional Education” (PSHEE), a long-term cross-curricular theme, delivered within a spiral-curriculum approach, that gives children the time that is necessary to fully understand all the complex and diverse aspects involved. This will gradually make them able to understand and enjoy their sexuality and respect that of others, as well as to develop gender awareness and define their own gender identities and expression, both of which must be seen as fundamental parts of being fully realized human beings (IPPF, 2010, UNESCO, 2018a, Council of Europe, 2020).

Developing SGE in this way requires a participatory teaching-learning approach able to engage children of successive ages in critical thinking. According to Bonjour & van der Vlugt (2018), there are several principles that define this approach to SEG, of which the most important ones are:

- a. Sexuality education is adapted to the needs and competencies according to the developmental stages of children and young people.
- b. Sexuality education is based on the core universal value of human rights.
- c. Sexuality education is based on a broad approach to sexuality, health, and sexual wellbeing (it is not only focused on prevention of illness or promotion of physical health).
- d. Sexuality education is firmly based on notions of gender equality, by addressing norms and values around gender and sexuality. It promotes equality, empowerment, non-discrimination, and respect for diversity.
- e. Sexuality education ideally starts at a very young age and continues through adolescence into adulthood.
- f. Sexuality education corresponds to the wishes, needs, lifestyles, and problems of children and adolescents themselves.
- g. Sexuality education is based on evidence and practice-based information (based on reliable data on sexual behavior, sexual health, and sexual development), using pedagogical theories and models of influencing behavior.
- h. Sexuality education is provided and delivered in a safe and healthy learning environment, free of discrimination, harassment, and sexual violence.

- i. Sexuality education is strongly linked with youth-friendly services (online/offline), so young people can get information, support, and supplies.
  - j. Sexuality education is delivered by participatory, interactive, and effective methods. It uses strategies to strengthen skills in communication, decision-making, and critical thinking.
  - k. Sexuality education aims at strengthening youth advocacy and civic engagement (particularly mentioned for developing countries).
  - l. Sexuality education works with an inclusive approach and takes into account all diversities.
- (p.9)

In this way, SGE is seen as a lifelong and lifewide learning process which provides an important and enriching contribution to emotional, social, interactive, and physical aspects of sexuality in a person. The acquired information must start from infancy onwards to enable a transition from knowledge-building towards developing positive attitudes to identity, relationships, values, beliefs, and intimacy, thereby reinforcing children's communication skills through promoting a mutual wellbeing in a holistic sense (Bonjour & van der Vlugt, 2018).

An essential component of such an approach is a positive attitude on the part of teachers so that children can develop the same type of attitude and parents can become reassured and convinced by the way in which SGE is being implemented and the results that are being achieved. A positive attitude means that children can engage in many topics which help them to live diverse aspects of their lives and their relationships openly and without fear or embarrassment.

For this to be possible, teachers must create learning environments in which children feel free and safe and in which together they can define rules of behaviour based on understanding and respect. The children themselves must be involved in playing an active role in developing, participating, and reflecting on activities based on mutually respecting interaction within a climate of acceptance and wellbeing. Many different methodologies and materials (including discussion, acting and the use of music or visual arts) can be used to introduce the contents and

build understanding and awareness as members of a group in which all members can be “significant others” for each other (WHO, 2010).

A particularly important aim of such an approach to SGE is to overcome sexist, racist and classist ideas of sexuality and gender and enable children to participate in critical reflection on cultural, religious, and societal issues together. Beliefs, assumptions, and arguments can be considered together, and contradictions, solutions and shared opinions and values can emerge by reflecting together on all the questions, personal experiences and points of view involved. Children are encouraged to be self-analytic while developing awareness about their own culture and traditions, together with promoting the importance of social justice and inclusive societies. Critical thinking can lead to social change as the result of an approach to SGE which emphasises building knowledge and skills through dialogue on complex topics that are directly relevant to children, and which takes into consideration developmental change during their life course (Bonjour & van der Vlugt, 2018).

To realize this, schools must be learning environments able to propose and facilitate learning of age-appropriate contents related to sexuality and gender within an open and favourable climate, so that children can engage with issues in a way they often may not have the opportunity to do at home with their parents. At the same time, the home environment has an undeniably important role to play in the upbringing of a child and must be encouraged and helped to build an equally open and favourable climate which contributes to developing autonomy and making healthy choices as children grow into adolescence and adulthood.

In this respect, collaboration between teachers and families is fundamental. Delivering age-appropriate SGE, means that schools must adequately take account of the different realities in which they operate. Teachers will frequently have to deal with parents or caretakers who will have a variety of different attitudes and who may often be sceptical or even openly opposed to the idea of SGE. They need to be able to dialogue with people’s doubts and eventual opposition and help them to build understanding of what SGE is and the reasons why it is important.

Of equal importance, is the question of how teachers position themselves as regards delivering SGE in the context of infant and primary schools and the children they work with (Bhana, 2016). They clearly need to recognize and overcome any difficulties they may have themselves in seeing children as sexual and gendered beings who are engaged in constructing their own ideas and expressions of sexuality and gendering together with others. At the same time, they must recognize and mediate the pervasiveness of gender differences and unequal power relationships. To do so, they may need to free themselves from some of their own mental structures, and it may well be highly complex for them to realize that they need to deconstruct their own socially constructed ways of thinking (Bhana, 2016). Such a process can require a considerable period of time. The way in which different cultures condition the minds of all human beings can create many difficulties in realizing an equilibrium between personal and professional selves, and this is often an obstacle to the successful introduction of SGE in different school systems and individual schools.

Guiding children in discussions and other activities and helping them to develop a capacity for critical reflection in different situations and contexts also takes time and needs adequate preparation for both teachers and learners (Bonjour & van der Vlugt, 2018). While teachers need to be authoritative concerning the contents and activities they propose and the way they introduce and manage them, careful consideration must be given to how they can deeply influence children's behaviour and way of thinking. Bhana's research on gender and childhood sexuality in primary school shows how teacher discourses can be powerful instruments to promote the idea that children in young age are able to think about and act out their feelings and behaviours related to gender and sexuality.

Recognition of this and the ability to act coherently with this understanding can empower teachers to change many aspects of the frequently unequal relationships between boys and girls (Bhana, 2016). Teachers have an important role in undoing misconceptions and transforming stereotypes within a climate of trust, understanding and co-construction of knowledge, where discourse must never be judgemental (IPPF, 2010). They can also be builders of a balanced class

community which aims to deconstruct normative heterosexualised discourses and resolve gendering conflicts, without necessarily leading children young age in any one specific gender and sexuality direction (Bhana, 2016).

SGE must therefore establish a place and a role for itself in the curriculum so that diverse communities and groups with different beliefs and convictions can accept and value it. Educational policy is of crucial significance in this because it must take into account the need for all stakeholders, professionals and children themselves to be involved and contribute to its success. There are still many countries which need to reconcile the introduction of SGE with their specific settings and cultural contexts, the values, and the priorities within the guidelines of the national curriculum. children's everyday lives.

Often without adequate guidance on how to take responsibility for SGE, many teachers do not feel sufficiently equipped or comfortable with the available material in order to adapt it to their given settings. Adapting an SGE curriculum to different cultural contexts and helping teachers to take account of local and specific group contexts and needs requires much work. At the same time, it is increasingly recognized that, for SGE to be successful, it is crucial to include children at a very early stage of their development in order to ensure their full engagement with the contents proposed, the materials used and the activities carried out, making them agents of their own change, and including their needs, ideas and opinions so as to create a curriculum which is adapted to SGE in the best way in terms of the specific environment in which it takes place (UNESCO, 2018a).

All the literature on SGE recognizes that its development still needs much more research able to monitor the impact of programmes and understand how best to incorporate it within the whole school with successful results. Such research will enable institutions and practitioners to offer more qualified, good practices and carry out assessment of the efficacy of SGE for children and young people in different contexts. At the same time, measuring impacts, in terms of changing attitudes as regards social norms, life skills, sexual behaviour, sexual satisfaction, gender equality and acting within the context of an informed consent within interpersonal relationships is difficult to measure. A further field of research

concerns the impact of SGE through online learning and how schools can become learning environments able to mediate and effectively exploit innovative offline and online input and methodologies (Bonjour & van der Vlugt, 2018).

## Chapter 2: Analyzing factors involved in implementing approaches to sexuality and gender education

An analysis of all the literature reviewed in the previous chapter of this thesis shows how implementing age-appropriate approaches to SGE requires careful consideration of the complex roles of social and cultural norms related to human behaviours and family organisation, together with legislation, curricular guidelines, school policies and teacher preparedness. Understanding how such factors manifest themselves in different contexts in terms of individual beliefs, attitudes and actions is thus of crucial importance.

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate each of these aspects with reference to the current situation in the Valle d'Aosta, by collecting and analysing data from the points of view of three of the principal protagonists involved in any such implementation: parents with children of infant and primary school age; teachers with varying amounts of experience teaching in infant and primary schools; students who are undergoing pre-service teacher education and who will become infant and primary school teachers.

### 2.1 The research methodology

Data collecting was conducted through organizing focus groups composed of members of each the above categories of protagonists.

Fifteen among all the categories volunteered to participate. Three primary school teachers (one man, two women), one infant schoolteacher (woman), two special needs teachers (women). Five students undergoing pre-service teacher education: one in his fifth year of university, one just graduated, one in her first year, two in their second year and one student of psychology in her first year of studies. Two parents with children younger than six years old, a man and a woman, and two parents with adolescents and pre-adolescents' children, a man, and a woman.

Regarding their age, the youngest participant of all groups was 18 at the time of the experiment and the oldest was 66 and for what concerns their education, five of the teachers had a bachelor's degree, but only two of them in education. One teacher had a high school diploma in education. The students came from different backgrounds: one of them had a bachelor's degree in philosophy, one came from a technical high school, two of them from a pedagogical high school, two attended a scientific high school in different cities. For what concerns the parents, two of them had a bachelor's in education. The other two parents held a middle school diploma. Four teachers worked full time, one teacher was in her first year of retirement and one teacher is working as an internship supervisor for students undergoing pre-service teacher education. Three students were working: one had been teaching for 6 months, the other one was a ski instructor and the third one worked part-time as a tutor for a special needs kid. The rest of the students were not working at the time. As regards the parents, one of them works as an assistant for elderly people, one is a primary school teacher, one works in a restaurant and the fourth one is an employee.

### 2.1.1 The choice of the focus group

The focus group was chosen as “a way of collecting qualitative data, which - essentially - involves engaging a small number of people in an informal group discussion (or discussions), 'focused' around a particular topic or set of issues” (Wilkinson, 2004, p. 177).

It is an inexpensive, relatively quick, and efficient method of obtaining qualitative data from multiple participants (Krueger & Casey, 2000). It enables building a "socially-oriented" and interactive environment (Krueger, 2000), to create a sense of belonging, to increase the sense of group cohesion (Peters, 1993), to help participants feel more comfortable sharing information (Vaughn, Schumm and Sinagub, 1996), make more spontaneous interventions (Butler, 1996), investigate problems, draw shared conclusions, and seek possible solutions

(Duggleby, 2005). According to Frisina (2010) it is an "interazione sociale situata" (p. 69), in which:

... i partecipanti [...] costruiscono e decostruiscono le loro opinioni: dobbiamo guardare ad esse come frutto di un'attività cooperativa piuttosto che attribuirle ai singoli individui. In breve, le rappresentazioni sono sociali e dinamiche, aperte al cambiamento perché complesse, ambivalenti" (Frisina, 2010, p. 79).

Furthermore, according to Corrao (1999), what happens in the focus group is something more than a simple cognitive confrontation, since it is "un'interazione personale che coinvolge tutta la persona e che permette la creazione di un'atmosfera confidenziale tale da favorire l'espressione di opinioni e sentimenti" (p. 96).

### 2.1.2 An analysis based on grounded theory

The analysis conducted was based on grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), whereby the starting point is the question to be considered (the points of view of the protagonists) and ways of categorizing and evaluating the data emerge as the analysis proceeds. As the categories emerge, they are coded, in order to summarize them and recuperate them easily. As the analysis proceeds, the categories may be consolidated or revised.

As the analysis of each of the focus groups continued, the following categories were developed, and each one was given a code. Further analysis was based on the assigning of the same codes and the identification of specific aspects and details for each one. The first category was identified as involving *sociocultural factors* (assigned the code SF) including aspects such as everyday life-construct conceptions, religious attitudes, traditional gender roles, and legislative frameworks. The second category was designated as *psychological factors* (assigned the code PF), concerning questions like individual personality,

personal sexual biography, and previous and current personal experience as gendered objects. The third category was designated as *didactic factors* (assigned the code DF), involving choices within school curricular policy, the availability of teaching approaches and materials, the attitudes of colleagues and parents, and the individual teacher's sense of being able to deal with questions related to SGE.

Once a transcript of each focus group had been produced, a first phase of analysis was conducted by inserting as marginal comments alongside participants' interventions one of the codes and in initial specifications such as *SF - everyday life-construct conceptions (changes in social norms and behaviours)*, *PF - reported previous experiences* and *DF - school curricular policy - use of external experts*. These were then developed as in the following paragraphs.

## 2.2 The results of the data analysis

The aim of the data analysis conducted was to conduct a force-field analysis (Lewin, 1951), to better understand factors that can facilitate and factors that impede change in terms of developing approaches to age-appropriate SGE. From the data analysis conducted emerges a complex picture related to various contextual factors.

### 2.2.1 Sociocultural factors

Various aspects connected with sociocultural factors emerged related to age, experience, perceptions, and values.

#### 1. Parents

From the parents' focus group data emerges a shared fear of the topic discussed. Talking about sexuality and gender is difficult for all of them and they feel they don't have enough tools for supporting their children and answering their questions. One man attributed his fear of talking about such matters with his daughter because he felt uncomfortable having different parts of the body related

to primary sexual characteristics from her and supposedly not having enough knowledge about female characteristics.

... io mi ricordo ancora mia figlia, andava ancora all'asilo e ci ha chiesto "da dove escono i bambini?" Perché sapeva che erano nella pancia della mamma perché avevamo un'amica che era incinta e le avevamo spiegato... "Ma da dove escono i bambini?" Io avevo detto a mia moglie, spiegaglielo tu che è tutto può facile.

A teenage boy's mother stated that her son is not very vocal about his life in general and therefore it's hard for her to communicate with him in general and above all about sexuality and gender. The group agreed that being a mother talking to a son was a significant factor in their communicative relationship. She felt uncomfortable many times as her sons asked questions and she avoided answering because 'non voglio dire delle cose... Volevo prepararmi io una risposta'.

While both these examples involved parents with children of a different sex from their own and also involved differences in age, the mother with six-year-old and four-year-old daughters reported that she explained very early to her girls how children were born in a conversation that she described as being very natural and easy to carry on.

... Come nascono i bambini... perché loro si guardavano. Si chiedevano "come sono fatta?", verso i 3-4 anni e allora erano lì che cercavano di capire da dove usciva la pipì e allora ho preso lo specchietto e ho fatto vedere che la pipì usciva da lì e mi chiedevano: "ma cosa serve questo buco più grande? È da dove esce la cacca?" e io ho detto che la cacca usciva da un'altra parte e ho spiegato che l'apertura più grande era da dove nascono i bambini perché i bambini stanno nella pancia della mamma, poi alcuni bambini sono nella posizione sbagliata e quindi viene fatto un taglietto nella pancia ed escono così, altri nascono dal buco che è molto elastico e si allarga piano piano finché il bambino non può uscire. Erano meravigliate che questo buco si potesse allargare così tanto. Però, l'hanno presa come una cosa molto naturale.

In part she felt unsure about the way she talked to her daughters because she wondered if it might have been too early for her daughters to hear specific terms at this age. However, at the same time she felt she wanted to be open and honest with her daughters since the environment in which the conversation happened was safe and relaxed for all the participants.

Another topic that was extensively discussed concerned the usage of the internet and social media. All the parents agreed that it was necessary to limit the independent usage of devices connected to the web and that they use, or would use when the time came, a parental block on all the devices that the children might come in contact in their home. Additionally, they had the same opinion concerning the importance of sharing as much knowledge on sexuality as they could before their children were free to use the internet. The mom of the pre-adolescent and the adolescent had been worried about the violence and about the unrealistic expectations that porn videos might install in one's mind, especially if the viewer doesn't have adequate knowledge about sex, love, and consent.

... Io quello che ho provato a dirgli è: “guarda che quelle cose... su internet, non solo sulla sessualità, ma anche su altre cose girano cose molto violente, ci sono delle scene violentissime che non bisogna andare a cercare perché poi alla fine ci rimani male, ci stai male” e insomma, qualcosa ci ho provato ad iniziare ad avvertirlo. Però le cose arrivano e non c'è niente da fare. E arrivano... io ho l'impressione che siano già preadolescenti in quinta elementare. Cioè molto più di anni fa.

Concern about social media usage was widespread among all the participants. Moreover, they all asserted that even if at home the devices are under the control of the parents, the children can easily get in contact with their peer's devices and see inappropriate content for their age.

... davvero è il rischio che... in qualche modo delle robe arrivano, il problema è riuscire ad anticipare e a dirgli che quella roba lì sono... si arrivano a vedere delle robe che sono più grandi anche della capacità

intellettiva e rischia di fare dei danni grandi. Credo che se non altro allora, almeno i blocchi a casa e che non cerchino nei cellulari nei principali contesti, un pochino fa... e nel mentre li prepari alle cose. Io pensavo a Samuele che è appunto in quarta elementare ed è arrivato a casa dicendo che c'erano dei compagni che guardavano Squid Game e Youpon. E mi fa: "Cos'è Youpon?" e lì quella volta gli ho detto: "Guarda Youpon non lo so", l'ho preso alla lontana, non voglio dire delle cose... Volevo prepararmi io una risposta. Un secondo momento gliene ho parlato prendendolo alla larga e quindi dicendogli alcune cose molto sintetiche e che al momento era troppo piccolo per vedere quelle cose lì e che in ogni caso anche quando sarà più grande sono cose che danno una rappresentazione diversa dalla realtà. Però al momento Youpon e Squid Game e mi diceva tra compagni avevano fatto un po' un sondaggio di chi vedeva... Youpon era poi caduto, era più Squid Game che erano in minoranza quelli che a casa lo guardavano. Però alla fine ci sono tante occasioni per parlare e per introdurre gli argomenti...

The group agreed that it can be hard to talk to one's child about sexuality and that they would willingly participate in a Sexuality and Gender education program for parents to learn how to talk to their children in a safe and age-appropriate way.

Two of the participants of the meeting expressed their reservations an open and inclusive treatment of sexuality and gender education, preferring a more traditional and heterosexual education for their children. Throughout the meeting there was often disagreement between the participants concerning sexual orientation and gender questions. Two parents with six year old children disagreed considerably:

... Noi preferiremmo che venisse insegnata l'educazione tradizionale...

... Anche perché a scuola magari ti spiegano come funziona per bene un rapporto sessuale tra uomo o donna e la prima coppia di uomini o di donne che tuo figlio incontra e ti chiede: "E loro cosa fanno?" In ogni caso la domanda esce fuori perché quando uno spiega il rapporto sessuale tra uomo e donna poi la prima coppia omosessuale che vedono, chiedono.

... magari non promuoverlo cioè nel senso che c'è, dire che esiste, infatti abbiamo discusso con un'amica che sua figlia ha sei anni le aveva chiesto se due uomini potevano stare insieme e la mamma le ha spiegato che sì certo, ok mentalità aperta. Quindi sapere che esiste sì, promuoverlo no perché loro non hanno ancora idea

One of the two parents who preferred a more traditional approach to SGE is a practicing Catholic and an active participant in the Church. This mother explained that for her it was important that homosexuality wasn't promoted. However, she also stated that respect for other people came before everything else and therefore it's everyone's right to choose a different life from the one that she chose for herself and her family. The father of the six-year-old boy brought up the topic of homosexuality in multiple occasions during the focus group. At the same time, he did not get many participants to react to his statements, since most of the time they were avoiding the topic unless the researcher asked their opinion directly.

Throughout the conversation, the topic that emerged the most was 'how to avoid being uncomfortable while talking about sex with my own children'. The all agreed on four points:

- 1) They would need to make an effort to discuss questions related to sexuality with their children while they are still young, while recognizing that it is hard for them to do so.
- 2) It is important to normalize topics such as how children are born, how couples are intimate with each other, what's on the web and why it gives a different perspective than reality.
- 3) Be honest and open to their children's questions because children understand when the parents are telling the truth to them.
- 4) Talk to the children and share the knowledge on sex before high school.

At the same time, they believe that it is difficult to define the roles of primary school and the family and how these can interact. In particular, there was general avoidance of discussion of the question of gender education, as if this was still something difficult to envisage.

## 2. Teachers

The discussion with the teachers started by thinking about how to define Sexuality and Gender Education and the participants had difficulty in understanding what 'gender education' means.

... Io so cosa vuol dire educazione alla sessualità, ma al genere no, puoi dirmi qualcosa?

Since nobody knew how to define it and they asked for clarification, the researcher pursued in informing them about 'gender education'.

... Allora il punto cruciale dell'educazione alla sessualità e al genere è che il sesso è biologico e che quindi viene assegnato alla nascita appunto un senso biologico che spesso coincide col genere ma il genere in realtà è l'espressione del sesso che spesso è coincidente con quello che si ha la nascita ma anche no e quindi educazione al genere e trasmettere la consapevolezza che non esiste solo il genere maschile femminile, ma che in mezzo ci possono essere delle diversità bianco è nero.

Some of the teachers then said that that they had received very limited sexuality education and that some of the information came from home (one of the participants has a parent that worked as a midwife and delivered sexuality education in schools), but most of their knowledge about sexuality was learned through friends, brothers and sisters, internet, life experiences.

e con chi vi sentivate a vostro agio per parlare di sessualità visto che nessuno vi ha mai spiegato niente?

... i miei coetanei sinceramente.

... io anche. Con qualche amica.

... non i miei genitori, non i genitori dei miei amici, ma parlavo con i miei coetanei e questo era. Benché non ci fossero i social o internet, le

idee erano abbastanza chiare per alcuni. Per altri meno però questo era. Poi le cose giravano.

... Io neanche con i compagni. Con gli amici non ne parlavo. Solo con mia sorella.

The conversation then shifted to the theme of social media. The group agreed that children nowadays often use social media, so they have more knowledge on sexuality and gender, but they only have the vision that the internet gives them. Children can also have difficult situations at home and therefore they don't seek information through their parents or other adults, but they use the tools that they have for easy and quick answers. This group of teachers stated that for them it's hard to deliver SEG because you don't get educated as a teacher on how to talk about sexuality and gender to children and especially which terms and topics are age-appropriate for those in their class.

Moreover, the teachers stated that children shouldn't have free access to the internet and that they should learn how to use it. However, they felt they didn't have enough time in school to teach them how to search the net in the correct way.

... Non può essere un insegnante ad insegnare ad usare internet. Perché o mi dai 3 ore alla settimana per insegnare ad usare internet oppure non è che posso insegnarti ad usare internet e matematica e tecnologia... come fai? Cioè non è che ti insegno 20 minuti alla settimana ad usare internet perché non ti insegno niente di nuovo. Quella deve essere proprio una cosa che deve essere in mano a mamma e papà e fratelli maggiori.

Social media has a large impact on the perception of sexuality and the teachers agreed that what is shown on the internet doesn't reflect reality. However, children get in contact with explicit scenes through websites and social media as early as primary school. The teachers felt that this is a topic that should be addressed since even on cable tv the children would see intimate scenes in advertisement or in movies. Moreover, some shows for children present characters that are gendered and sexualized. This therefore enhances the exposition to a view

of society and gender norms that is distorted. Children get information in the immediate way that they perceive it and bring to school what they understood or misunderstood, without the ability to discriminate.

Some of the participants shared their concern about how to handle the way in which children relate videos, pictures, and information in general that they gathered on the internet. Their worry was about the fact that they didn't know how to address the discussions that the children had and therefore risk reinforcing the idea of the taboo that those topics shouldn't be discussed.

... Appena c'è la lezione di scienze ti riempiono di domande, ma cosa succede che noi dall'altra parte non sappiamo cosa rispondere; quindi, si crea anche l'idea del taboo, cioè questo è un argomento di cui non bisogna parlare e quindi di conseguenza anche il bambino dice che è un argomento di cui non si deve parlare e allora nel momento in cui ha un problema non se la sente di chiedere aiuto e di parlarne.

... "mi cerco le risposte da solo", con cosa? Con l'unica cosa che ho che sarebbe internet.

... E torniamo sempre lì, quindi bisogna in qualche modo stoppare questa disinformazione.

Moreover, the teachers observed how children in primary school are still very physical in their contact with the teachers and consequently when they see sexual scenes on TV they tend to react as if it was normal and permissible to touch people and hug them without asking for consent. The teachers agreed that they would need a course on how to deliver SGE in an age-appropriate way.

Another topic that was discussed and that created some debate was how much could the teachers say about SGE in class without conflicting with families' cultures and beliefs. They all agreed that the school needs to welcome the families and make them feel safe in sending their children to class every day. Families have a hard time emotionally and psychologically when it comes to raising children and caring for them in an environment that includes issues that are difficult to explain.

The fact that some of the parents are not so much focused on their children as concentrated on their own problems, makes it even harder to deliver SGE in a

way that would be accepted from everybody. All families have different values, cultures and beliefs and it's up to the teacher to find a way to mediate these differences to be able to work in the best way possible.

### 3. Student teachers

The fact that the focus group of the students who are undertaking pre-service teacher education presents a large age gap between the participants meant that the ideas that emerged in the group were wide-ranging and differentiated.

The first topic that emerged was about the purpose of Sexuality and Gender Education. For some participants it meant explaining the mechanics of sex, raising awareness on the LGBTQ+ community and the different gender stereotypes that exist, while for others the aim was explaining the right to love everybody and be able to express that. What emerged was a difference between one group formed by younger participants (19, 20 and 21 years old), that had a vision that focused more on bodies, appearance and sexual activity, and another group, more mature in age (25, 32 and 40 years old) focused more on discussing emotions and the right of self-expression.

One of the most recurrent topics that the student teachers discussed about was about the knowledge that they wished they had had growing up, especially in the teenage years, since they believed that children grow up very fast and they start developing as teenagers earlier than society thinks or would like to think.

... secondo me verso la metà delle elementari si può cominciare a parlarne perché comunque tante ragazzine entrano già nell'età dell'adolescenza alle elementari e immagino che molte volte si trovino davanti a qualcosa che non conoscono e non sanno come reagire e può anche creare del disagio non conoscere questo aspetto di sé stessi.

The perception that they had about SGE was that for them it hadn't been broad or deep enough, rather like getting a lecture on topic, rather than giving it the space for discussion and the importance that it deserved. The classes that they had had were conducted by experts with whom they didn't have a personal relationship and most of them felt embarrassed both because they didn't feel at ease with the expert and because

they felt as if they should have had already information about sexuality, but they didn't have. The information that was given in class was not enough for them and it didn't impact on their life.

... è un po' come dire "questo è il sesso, non fatelo".

Moreover, they didn't receive any emotional education or how to be affectionate with someone. They stated that they felt scared by the information that they encountered and that it felt like they were talking about animals and not human beings and their feelings. They didn't have any trusted person to talk to (an adult, not a peer) and they were seeking information about what sexuality meant, what was 'allowed' behaviour and what you can find in the world among people concerning sexuality.

... eh esatto è tutto molto standardizzato quello che viene messo ad educazione sessuale alle medie.

... e forse anche un po' di paura, trasmettono anche un po' di paura. Non lo fanno da un punto di vista di affetto, c'è proprio un'altra parte di questo che dovrebbe venire insegnata perché essendo comunque repressa prima o comunque in qualche modo non te la fanno sviluppare poi non vedi quel lato. Cioè vedi solo quel lato fisico e di istinti che devono essere...

... si è un po' animalesco.

They also believed that school has a large impact on behaviors related to sexuality that are considered deviant. One of the students said that she went to a school that was mainly considered for boys because it was a technical institute and therefore most of the classes were composed only of boys. Every girl that attended that school, maybe one or two per year, was bullied and labeled as a lesbian, perpetuating the misconception that lesbians are more like boys.

... in questa scuola le ragazze potevano iscriversi però non era socialmente accettato. Ce n'era una ogni dieci anni che subito era additata come lesbica o anche peggio. Cioè una che si iscrive alla scuola dei maschi ed è l'unica donna... chissà perché? E giravano tutte queste voci.

They all agreed that some behaviors that are considered deviant should be normalized since they do not harm anybody, they exist, and everybody should be open minded and have no problems with them. Society tends to present an idea of the life that people should live, but what society presents does not coincide with what happens in the private lives of many people. Therefore, we need to go beyond the idea of conforming to norms.

... Cosa consideriamo devianza nella società? Quello che è deviante da uno standard, da una norma. Ciò non puoi considerare deviante un comportamento in linea con... per assurdo un esempio: se vivessimo in una società omosessuale, la devianza sarebbe l'eterosessualità, giusto? Quindi tutta questa questione ruota sul fatto che la norma è l'eterosessualità e la devianza è tutto ciò che non è eterosessualità, non solo l'omosessualità, ma anche l'assenza di sessualità e altri generi. Secondo me in più in questo paradigma sociale, la devianza potrebbe anche un rapporto eterosessuale fra persone con disabilità intellettiva... la butto lì. Cioè nel senso: quello è un comportamento deviante? Dipende dalla cultura di riferimento. Quindi l'educazione sessuale come l'abbiamo definita in questo campo, appunto dovrebbe innanzitutto riferirsi alla dimensione affettiva. Perché qualsiasi persona nel paradigma inclusivo dovrebbe avere il diritto all'affettività e anche alla sessualità, ma potrebbe anche avere il diritto all'affettività senza poi consumare di fatto un rapporto sessuale, ma semplicemente, non è semplice, soltanto... neanche soltanto... appunto il diritto di amare forse se mettiamo in questi termini e se incliniamo sotto questo punto di vista l'argomento, capiamo come nella scuola l'amore sia un tabù, l'innamoramento e di conseguenza se un bambino di 8 anni non può concettualizzare alcune tematiche riguardo alla sessualità, sicuramente la dimensione affettiva e amorosa è più vicina a lui. Sta di fatto che rimane sempre lì il punto: nella nostra società cosa vuol dire amare e perché due persone dello stesso sesso si possono o non si possono amare.

The student teachers also reported that society still tries to represent different groups of people, such as those identifying as transgender, as something to be considered wrong in terms of normalized behaviors. However, they all stated that in their opinion, the 'normalizing process' they perceive is being carried out in a way in

which people that are considered ‘different’ are made fun of and even exploited because of their difference.

... il problema è che alcuni diventano anche dei personaggi e viene vista la prima immagine perché è la più evidente. Faccio un esempio: di italiano Malgioglio, o il programma recente Drag Race, sono le immagini più evidenti, quelle che influenzano le persone e non quelle più normali e quindi quella è l’ottica che si riflette perché i genitori vedono e influenzano i propri figli a riguardo.

They agreed that this kind of representation enhanced the gender norms that society has and that although generally people try to be more open-minded, gendered items are still very present in the life of everybody. They gave the example of the toys that you can find for children. For example, it is popular to have ‘boy toys’ and ‘girl toys’ that might serve the same purpose, but they are especially made for one gender or the other.

... Oltre alla televisione mi è capitato di fare un giro in un negozio qualsiasi di giocattoli e c’era proprio lo stesso gioco che era il “dolceforno”, la cucinetta. Una fabbrica aveva messo il disegno con un bambino e una bambina che giocava al cuoco, un’altra fabbrica aveva messo solo la bambina. Questo l’ho visto l’anno scorso sotto Natale, cioè non è che l’ho visto nel ’99 quando avevo un anno.

The discussion continued talking about the setting that is displayed in a kindergarten. At school gender norms are less present because most of the times children have all the toys on display or in bins and they have the freedom to choose what they want to play with, and they are still very young and don’t necessarily understand the rules dictated by society on gender norms. In this sense, the students agreed that teacher should be welcoming and respectful of everybody since at home children might have some difficult situation in which parents have taboos over SGE. School has the duty of overcoming those taboos, informing, and guiding children in a safe way within a safe environment. They agreed that this was the key to build a better

society in which people felt safe to express themselves the way they felt was right for them.

## 2.2.2 Psychological factors

The focus on psychological factors also led to the emergence of a range of aspects related to age, experience, perceptions, and values.

### 1. Parents

From the parents' point of view clearly emerged that they had many concerns about how to deliver SEG in an efficient and age-appropriate way. This is mainly caused by the fact that they all come from a generation that received little or no SGE both from their family upbringing and from the school that they attended. Two of the parents involved received some limited sex education focused primarily on prevention of STIs and pregnancies and based on a heterosexual approach and from the Catholic point of view.

Although they did not have much information on how to deliver SGE, all the parents agreed in saying that children had a right and a need to have knowledge about sex and relationships and that it is never too early to give them information about it. Moreover, they concurred that children ask many questions because of their curious nature and that most of the time those questions are asked at very inconvenient times. However, it's important to take the time to answer truthfully and clearly at that specific moment before their interest fades or they seek for answers somewhere else.

... Per la mia esperienza, posso dire che queste domande capitano quando non sei pronto, stiamo facendo tutt'altro e te ne esci con questa cosa qui e dici ma? E però non si può neanche dire "te ne parlo un'altra volta" cioè liquidare credo che non sia corretto no? Per cui bisogna cogliere quella domanda in quel momento preciso.

Throughout the discussion, all the parent openly shared their own upbringing on SGE. While two of them received some sex education in school or

at their church. the others gained their knowledge from friends and media such as magazines, newspapers, and films. None of them felt that they could speak to their parents about sex because they seemed too busy with work or other activities and the only thing that came out of conversation was that before having a boyfriend or a girlfriend they should concentrate more with their studies.

... ma io non ne parlavo tanto perché ero già più chiusa di mio e poi no, beh i miei genitori li vedevo spesso indaffarati, presi da altre cose e no, non mi osavo neanche parlarne tanto. Mi ricordo che spesso mia mamma mi diceva “Andrée il ragazzo più in là, adesso pensa agli studi, queste cose più in là”. Lei teneva che io finissi prima gli studi e poi questa sfera la lasciava un po’ al dopo e quindi questa frase che mi ritorna ancora. Con questa frase in testa non ne ho mai tanto parlato con i miei. Solo bisogni pratici di un adolescente. Però basta.

The relationship with the parents changed once they got married and considered starting a family.

... Anche io ero abbastanza riservata. Non era un tema da parlare con la mamma, anche mia mamma lavorava tanto, la vedevo tanto indaffarata, non ho mai giocato con lei quindi non mi sarei mai messa a parlare con lei di queste cose. È un rapporto che abbiamo riscoperto da grandi, quindi dopo i vent’anni magari, dopo i trenta. Prima no.

... quindi vuol dire che prima non ne parlavi con tua mamma e dopo è diventato un argomento più frequente?

... più frequente no, forse diciamo che è più stata legata a quando cercavo i figli ecco, per cui poteva essere un discorso legato più a quegli anni lì da adulta. Ma a quel punto era un rapporto da adulta che avevo con lei, non c’era più quell’asimmetria così netta.

Another question that was asked concerned the influence of traditional gender roles on mainstream society.

... Certe cose sono più culturali, ma non rappresentano il genere per forza. Non mi viene un esempio però quelle cose che “l’uomo è così, la donna è così”, “questo lo deve fare l’uomo, questo lo deve fare la donna”, mi sembrano proprio più stereotipi e invece credo che ci sia più una differenza di comportamento, di stile di apprendimento, relazionale che è anche un po’ legata ai generi, ma non lo è un lavoro. Cioè è vero che un lavoro più fisico facilita un uomo, però certi stereotipi lavorativi sono davvero stereotipi quindi duri a morire, ma non rappresentano per forza il genere.

While it is society that dictates gender roles and stereotypes, and the parents all agreed that there shouldn’t be a distinction between “mother’s work” and father’s work” in terms of who does what. Everything should be a “parent’s job”. The eldest participant said that when he was a child, since he had 3 other siblings, his mother gave everybody a chore and he had to wash the dishes, which would be normally a “girl’s chore”.

... Per i miei compagni di classe era una cosa assurda che io lavassi i piatti perché allora c’era ancora questa cosa che... Io però a casa mia ho sempre lavato i piatti, con la sedia perché non arrivavo neanche al lavandino, le mie sorelle facevano altro, una sbarazzava... però da questo punto di vista, a casa mia non c’è mai stata questa differenza.

## 2. Teachers

All the teachers agreed that SGE should start as early as kindergarten. Young children start to experiment their unicity and individuality. Therefore, introducing some topics leading towards freedom of expression together with body differences related to males and females means that the children start to get comfortable with their thoughts and their bodies at an early stage. Moreover, if such topics are not addressed early on, children will get the information somewhere else, and they will tend to feel embarrassment and shame when talking about sensitive topics with adults.

Some of the participants believed that some children, by the time they get to the end of primary school have more knowledge about sex and sexuality than

many adults, since they browse the internet and they interpret the videos they watch, the pictures they see and the information that they read about. Most of the teachers agreed that it's embarrassing to talk to children about sexuality and gender if they have no knowledge on what's age-approved and if the children go beyond what can be considered the age-appropriate level.

... bisogna insistere molto sulla famiglia. Noi avevamo anche dei bambini che andavano su dei siti eccetera e facevano la quarta e la quinta e ci andavano con cugini molto più grandi e i genitori non sapevano niente. Genitori separati e quindi...

... e voi come facevate a saperlo?

... eh ce lo raccontavano. Ci diceva proprio quello che faceva e quello che vedeva.

... e voi cosa dicevate?

... eh dicevamo che... partivamo a chiamare la mamma...

... no ma ai bambini nell'immediato, cosa dicevate?

... eh adesso non mi ricordo bene, però cercavamo di tamponare un po'. Perché lui ci diceva delle cose molto spinte, molto forti.

Three teachers that participated in the discussion come from an older generation and therefore they didn't receive SGE either from school or from their parents. In their teenage years it was hard for them to discuss about sex with their peers and therefore they just experienced their sexuality through life events, with very little knowledge about it. This impacted on their ability to deliver SGE to their children. During the discussion, they had some difficulties in expressing their thoughts clearly when they had to use a specific word such as porn, sex, masturbation, menstruation to explain what had happened in class or to tell about their own personal experiences.

... noi una volta avevamo avuto una psicologa che era specializzata in sessualità. Avevamo avuto un episodio grosso in classe e lei aveva fatto

diverse sedute con la classe e aveva spiegato a grandi linee. Aveva spiegato poi bene.

These difficulties that they encounter prevent them to deliver SGE thoroughly and to equip children with the information that they might have needed.

... basti pensare solo a scuola quanti bambini abbiamo visto dai 7 ai 10 anni dondolarsi avanti e indietro a scuola. In tutti i modi, e come fai a spiegargli? A me è capitato tantissime volte. Li porti fuori, li cambi, ragioni con loro... Non puoi dirgli che non si può fare, che non si può fare in classe, ma non puoi dirglielo interamente perché non sai il vissuto di questo bambino e diventa difficile. Quante volte ci siamo ritrovati in queste situazioni, tantissime. Che poi di fronte agli altri compagni diventa difficile da spiegare.

One of the younger teachers shared her experience with a girl with Down Syndrome and the refusal that she had received from the rest of the teachers when she asked if she could prepare a project on sexuality since the girl had begun having her period and didn't have any knowledge on how to handle it.

... ho riportato l'episodio alle mie colleghe e ho detto che secondo me forse era il caso che facessimo qualcosa. Questa volta era andata bene, la prossima volta non lo sappiamo. Nel frattempo, arrivano anche le mestruazioni e tira giù. Le mie colleghe mi hanno detto di no perché i bambini erano piccoli anche se erano in quarta e mi hanno detto assolutamente di no. Io ho provato un po'.

The rest of the teachers, especially the other two younger ones, agreed that they would have helped, while at the same time admitting that you never know what you would do in a difficult situation until you are faced with it.

### 3. Student teachers

The main feeling that the students carried on through the conversation was the deep sense of embarrassment that they had felt through the whole process of discovering information about sexuality and gender. This feeling was expressed because most of them experienced SGE delivered with the help of experts from school. The

students didn't like having an expert around because it felt very impersonal and superficial. The classes that they received were informative about sexual intercourse, STIs and pregnancies prevention, but nobody explained anything about love and affective relationships.

Most of the student teachers agreed that they had looked on the internet to seek for information since another feeling that they experienced was frustration. They were frustrated because they had suddenly found themselves in a body that had grown up quickly, but nobody had warned them, and they didn't recognise themselves in "their new skin". They would have wanted to have someone to talk to from their primary school and they kept wondering if in the following school grade someone would deliver SGE in a way that was inclusive and exhaustive. However, they are now attending university and they never experienced SGE in the way that they would have wanted to receive it.

The older student shared her positive experience with her parents. She said that they were very open with her when it came to talking about sexuality and affective relationships. They also shared with her knowledge about homosexuality since they had close family friends that identified as lesbians. The parents gave the information truthfully and with age-appropriate terms, so the student could understand the answers to her questions thoroughly.

... Ma io mi ricordo che in quinta elementare avevamo fatto la classica lezione di scienze presentata dalla mia maestra e poi mi ricordo che a casa ne avevo parlato e ne avevo parlato con i miei genitori ed era stato in realtà molto bello perché ne avevamo parlato insieme ed era stato proprio un momento in cui avevamo parlato di sensibilità, di sentimenti perché senò a scuola spesso viene fuori proprio un discorso che spesso viene appiattito e esposto solo dal punto di vista fisico. Però devo dire che quando ero piccola che facevo le elementari ho un po' avuto la fortuna per quei tempi di avere due amiche di famiglia omosessuali che non abitano qui, ma abitano in un'altra città che sono proprio delle carissime amiche dei miei zii. E io mi ricordo che avevo chiesto a mia mamma: "ma perché loro abitano insieme, sono due sorelle?" E mia mamma mi aveva detto "No" e io le avevo detto: "ma sono due amiche?" E mi aveva detto una risposta bellissima che io ancora adesso

ricordo che poi ai bambini basta poco. Lei mi aveva detto: “loro si vogliono bene come ci vogliamo bene io e papà quando sarai più grande capirai che ci sono tanti modi per volersi bene e per stare insieme”. Io ancora adesso la considero una risposta molto bella che mi era stata data. Mia mamma non aveva usato la parola omosessuale però mi aveva detto senza dirmi delle bugie, mi aveva detto che era un modo per volersi bene molto profondo e con il tempo è stata una parte molto importante per me.

All the students agreed, after this statement, that having a broad knowledge of the world and the possibilities that it offers and manifests, without having to give a label to everything that one encounters, has a positive impact on the person because it stimulates the individual to be open-minded.

### 2.2.3 Didactic factors

The focus on didactic factors led to the emergence of aspects principally related to a lack of guidelines, training, experience, and resources.

#### 1. Parents

The idea what contents and what methodologies for SGE that might be proposed in schools today was very vague among the whole group of participants.

... Mia figlia a scuola penso che abbiano fatto poco e niente, al limite hanno fatto qualcosa di educazione sessuale, ma poco.

The group was curious to be given information on what children do in school and asked many questions about it. They tried to give each other answers with the information that they had and the background they had, related to questions such as having worked in a school or knowing someone who does, having older children, etc. They agreed that preschool is not too early to start delivering some aspects of SGE, but at the same time they were not sure if children of this age should have specific information about sex as an activity. Some of them made principally reference to *l'educazione all'affettività*, focusing more on relationships, love, and wellbeing with other people.

There was considerable discussion about what could be age-appropriate and what kind of topics should be introduced. Most believed that children would “teach themselves” about sexuality and gender if not given information and that they would find a way to get to information in an inappropriate manner. Moreover, children would interpret the information that they found based on the previous knowledge that they had, and this was believed to be inappropriate and dangerous. Therefore, everybody agreed that delivering SEG in a safe environment would be better for the children. As emerged in the discussion of sociocultural factors, two of the parents would prefer for their children to have a more traditional school education, based on heterosexuality and heterosexual intercourse. The other two parents were more open to schools presenting a broader spectrum of SGE. At the same time, when the question of introducing children to homosexual love was raised, nobody reacted, and the topic was quickly dropped.

... non so la gente fa tanto fatica a spiegare ad un bambino per quale motivo uno abbia una mamma e un papà e un altro due mamme o due papà. Evidentemente è facile, sono due persone che si amano e che si vogliono bene... chiaro che il coso del genere uno se lo porta dietro, ma è difficile spiegarlo ad uno che non sa niente... essendo parte così forse è più facile.

As regards defining what are the age-appropriate topics, the group agreed that SGE should be introduced in everyday conversations involving life and relationships since starting to discuss specific topics in the fifth year of primary school was perceived to be too late. Moreover, SGE was defined by one of the parents as a question of creating a network between family and school. Schools deal with topics in a global way to answer the needs of all the learners in given classroom, while families give a different kind of support. The parents agreed that the schools should introduce projects designed to talk about sexuality and relationships and that it would be useful to involve experts, such as psychologists or psychotherapists to deal with the overall wellbeing area, within which to discuss topics related to sexuality and gender.

Some parents clearly expressed that they don't feel ready to talk about sexuality with their children and that it would be useful to have a course especially designed for parents. This would give them more security and understanding concerning what is age-appropriate. This is particularly important since it seemed to all the group that children get more information much earlier than a few years ago.

... Io ho paura di non essere pronta quando mi faranno queste domande. Perché già adesso girano delle cose... cioè lei fa prima e già sente e nel senso io ho sempre pensato che questo momento sarebbe arrivato in là... in quinta, quarta... alle medie e invece adesso con questi media eccetera ne sentono e le voci girano e mi devo preparare un po' prima.

In addition, parents were also concerned about the kind of preparation that schoolteachers would have on these topics. These uncertainties about the knowledge of the teachers regarded not only for the way in which SGE would be delivered, but also about how this would relate their own family situations and values. However, all the participants agreed that their children needed to ask questions and to receive answers and that a school-family SGE network was an important step forward.

## 2. Teachers

Several participants shared their concern over the little knowledge that they had on SGE to be able to choose contents, materials, and methodologies. The approach that some of them suggested start by listening to the students and families' needs. They stated that they think that it's important with such sensitive topics that the communication with the families become open and multilateral. Delivering SGE in the best way possible means that multiple agencies work together to provide knowledge and emotional support to the children.

For some of the participants, SGE should start at home between the children and their parents, and the teachers will later have the task of fulfilling the needs that the families were unable to satisfy. Schools should have the possibility to work

with children that already have some knowledge on questions related to sexuality and gender to continue delivering it in a continuous way that goes deeper into the topic each time that it's addressed and avoid taboos. The participants agreed that they would want to maintain an open communication with the parents to decide together about topics to discuss and address the difficulties. Moreover, based on the lack of experience that they had, the participants were in the agreement that there should be a training course that they could participate in. This would allow them to express their fears and give them some guidelines on what is age-appropriate and on how to deliver SGE in an educational contest.

... No, per me no. Però secondo me prima di insegnare ai bambini dovremmo ricevere noi una formazione in merito perché comunque sono argomenti molto delicati da affrontare con dei bimbi così piccoli. Secondo me dovremmo avere anche noi una formazione di base che ci aiuta ad affrontare gli argomenti. È vero che i bambini sono più preparati, però a volte spesso i social danno tantissime informazioni sbagliate e bisogna aiutare i bambini e noi abbiamo bisogno di sapere cosa e come affrontare gli argomenti sia mettendoci d'accordo con i genitori però anche avendo proprio, non so essere indirizzati nel modo giusto.

Some of the teachers said that they feel that SGE should start with topics such as dealing with emotions, cultural diversity, and body parts. After exploring those topics from kindergarten, in which it's easily done since there are no strict curriculum guidelines to follow, SGE could be more specifically focused on various aspects of sexuality and gender. The participants all agreed that delivering information on SEG based only on STIs, pregnancies prevention and safe sex is not enough and that those topics, often delivered by experts, are often cold and embarrassing for the children if they didn't have knowledge and experience about questions relating to relationships, caring for others, love, and mutual consent.

... infatti quello che volevo dire prima è che secondo me l'educazione alla sessualità è un percorso che va fatto, ma magari bisogna partire dall'infanzia con l'educazione alle emozioni e deve essere un percorso

che arriva fino a che i bambini crescono e lì poi vai a spiegargli quali sono le cose relative alla sessualità.

In addition to this, the participants agreed that the older the children, the more information they get on the internet. Often it seems as if children have more knowledge on sexuality than adults, but the facts that they browse are often misunderstood and not age-appropriate. When children don't understand the videos they watch, the pictures they see and the information that they read, they might engage in inappropriate and divergent behaviors that are difficult to handle and full of risks.

... I bambini dell'infanzia e della prima sono particolarmente, toccano particolarmente le insegnanti. Nel senso, le abbracciano tanto e quello è il momento di contatto e quindi è normale, visto anche in televisione, cercano il contatto, ma perché sono ancora piccoli. Quindi è un momento che va un attimino controllato.

The teachers agreed that they were concerned not only about parents' but also colleagues' reactions, since many teachers are against delivering SGE or giving information on sexuality in general.

... Eh lo so, perché penso che molti insegnanti... cioè mi dicevano proprio "guarda che queste cose qui non le dobbiamo spiegare noi, le devono spiegare mamma e papà. Lascia perdere perché poi la mamma e papà arrivano e ti contestano".

When talking about social media, the participants agreed that it is important that children don't use the internet until a certain age. However, it is impossible nowadays to restrict everything, even with the parental block, and since it is personal to each family how to deal with devices and internet, teachers should be prepared to manage the situation in which social media have an important role. However, none of the participants felt adequately prepared for handling cyberbullies and inappropriate internet browsing. They stated that the school doesn't have time to teach how to use the internet safely because the rest of the

curriculum is very dense and rigid, and other subjects and topics are given priority rather than SGE or emotional education. The teachers expressed their frustration about the inexistence of guidelines since they have been delivering some SGE out of personal initiative, without knowing if the information that they gave was exhaustive, age-appropriate and approved by families.

... questo bambino ha deciso di mettere la gonna [nello spettacolo di Natale] allora io ricordo di averlo detto alla mamma “guarda è due volte che glielo chiediamo e lui dice di voler mettere la gonna, ti va bene?” Perché non volevamo che quel giorno cadesse dalle nuvole e lei ha accettato. La scelta che avevamo fatto io e la mia collega era stata intuitiva perché allora non si sapeva come fare. Per cui se uno è nell'accettazione e nell'ascolto forse è il criterio che poi non ti porta a creare situazioni di disagio.

The discussion focused then on the use of external experts as a source of safe information for delivering SGE. In this respect, the teachers didn't fully agree with the classes delivered by an expert such as a psychologist or a midwife since the experts don't know the children that they face, and they don't have a personal relationship. The teachers felt that employing an expert would create more embarrassment for the children. Topics in SGE are highly sensitive and should be delivered by someone that knows the limits and the personalities of the children. Therefore, the participants all agreed in saying that the role of experts should be to provide training for them on how to safely deliver SGE to the classes.

Moreover, the expert would only come to school on a one off or occasional basis and teachers need to be equipped to answer questions at any time since avoiding the topics give the idea that there are taboos and that some questions can't be answered.

... solo che a volte il bambino ti fa la domanda, vengono fuori queste cose cioè che l'esperto non c'è. Magari l'esperto arriva una volta al mese, effettivamente la preparazione dell'insegnante è importantissima.

The discussion ended with the agreement that answering the questions that the children ask with honesty and correct terminology helps normalizing topics that are still risk being taboo.

... io ricordo un nostro alunno che durante, io insegnavo scienze in quella classe, ad un certo punto mi ha detto: “Ma Giusy lo sai che i bambini nascono dalla patata” ed era... cioè l’ha detto solo per provocarmi. E io l’ho guardato e ho detto: “Sì è vero, hai ragione, i bambini nascono, escono dalla vagina delle mamme. E lui c’è rimasto male perché io non ho colto la sua provocazione perché lui era convinto che mi sarei arrabbiata e l’avrei sgridato.

... ma è la strategia che spesso uso io... spesso quando mi fanno delle domande un po’ provocatorie io tendo ad essere estremamente onesta e scientifica, fin troppo a volte, ma almeno gli dai la risposta che loro capiscono quello che vogliono capire e finisce lì.

### 3. Student teachers

The perception that the student teachers had concerning SGE in the school presented similarities throughout the whole group. The first topic that was discussed was whether homosexuality should be included, as well as how early should children learn about the LGBTQ+ community. They agreed that excluding homosexuality from SGE would contribute to fomenting the taboos that are being created among non-heterosexual people and that children should learn that two men and two women can love each other if they want to. They concurred that SEG should not only include the physical aspects of sexual intercourse, but should include affection, love, and respect towards other people. Moreover, they agreed that both teachers and parents should know how SGG works to be able to work together towards the same goals.

In their experience, SGE was delivered poorly, and gender stereotypes were enhanced by enforcing some rules since kindergarten. Some students testified that they attended a kindergarten in which children had to wear a blue blouse if they were boys and a pink one if they were girls. On this topic they agreed that gender stereotypes should be countered as early as kindergarten by just giving the freedom of picking whatever color the children want for their blouse or other articles.

... A volte succede appunto che delle insegnanti, non dico lungimiranti, però normalmente attente a questo genere di attenzioni, semplice attenzione al genere. Ovvero, come dicevi tu l'asciugamanino rosa per le bambine e azzurro per il maschietto. L'azzurro... ci sono solo due colori nel mondo?

Several participants stated that the teachers they met in their internship or in their school experience that delivered SGE, were doing it although it was not a part of the school curricula. They agreed that going against the system can be a way of starting to introduce and spread SGE, but they also asserted that this was not the way teachers should have to act and that they felt uncomfortable about doing it. More specifically, if teachers are delivering SGE in their own way, without following any guideline, how can they be sure that they are doing it in the best way possible?

The student teachers were all in agreement when talking about when SEG should be delivered. This should start as early as kindergarten, beginning with teaching about bodies and about differences in body parts among boys and girls. The children should acknowledge the different body parts and be aware that the genitals are not "dirty" but that they should be kept private. One student reported his experience while talking about genitals in kindergarten.

... ma io devo dire che ho avuto degli insegnanti alla scuola dell'infanzia che avevano proposto un progetto, ho ricordi sfocati, su questa dimensione dell'affettività e sull'uso di termini specifici. Ovvero, la lezione, per quel che mi ricordo si basava su un video, sulle vecchie VHS, in cui c'era un primo approccio all'educazione sessuale, ma anche affettiva nel quale si andava a spiegare sì, la differenza tra i corpi dei bambini, ma anche appunto mi ricordo la maestra aveva aperto un dibattito sui nomi simpatici che i nostri genitori davano ai genitali che di per sé è una parte molto intima, uno si vergogna di dire agli altri. Però ad un certo punto mi ricordo che noi tutti volevamo dirlo. Anzi, io ero uno degli ultimi perché ero un po' timido, ma avevo la mano alzata e la maestra fa "va bene, passiamo ad altro" e io invece volevo proprio dirlo che io e mio papà quando facciamo il bidet mi dice... cioè il termine buffo, simpatico. Perché appunto come

dicevamo sempre prima, nell'esplorazione del proprio corpo, i genitali fanno parte del corpo e quindi il bambino anche prima dei 3 anni si scopre e inizia a scoprirsi. Così come scopre il mondo intorno a sé, come scopre le potenzialità dei nostri sensi, è proprio alla scuola dell'infanzia che noi sviluppiamo le nostre competenze e le nostre conoscenze sui corpi.

Moreover, children experiment their own body while in kindergarten and adults should not stop that.

... alla scuola dell'infanzia i bagni non sono distinti. Non c'è una differenza di genere nei bagni e quindi i bambini fanno i propri bisogni fisiologici nello stesso bagno. Alla scuola primaria a volte iniziano già a distinguersi i generi anche se la differenza di età tra quelli di cinque e quelli di sei... cioè da fine giugno dalla fine della scuola dell'infanzia, all'inizio della scuola primaria sono passati tre mesi. Cos'è cambiato in questi tre mesi? Cioè hanno scoperto il sole e la luna? No.

Schools should welcome and include every question that the children might have, and they should treat every topic with age-appropriate language and be able to mediate with the families. All adults, whether parents or teachers, have the duty to guide children and help them enter adolescence and adulthood with all the knowledge that they will need. As regards the teacher's role at school, they need to be respectful of beliefs and cultures, but they also need to include a comprehensive treatment of SGE in their classes. In this respect they must be able to accommodate both children and families, with all their needs, worries and questions and be open minded when it comes to difficult topics such as SEG. Teachers should keep in mind that families may often explain things in a different way than school does, but it does not mean that one way is right and the other wrong. Different ways reflect different perspectives and roles.

... Poi, se posso solo aggiungere una cosa, in realtà la mediazione... non è che c'è una ricetta quindi secondo me il compito dell'insegnante è un accogliere il bambino e accogliere la famiglia... cioè così su tutti gli argomenti. Qualsiasi cosa venga affrontata a scuola che può essere

non so... tra poco ci sarà il 25 aprile cioè magari come la scuola, l'insegnante pone quell'argomento di tipo politico a casa non è uguale, ma banalmente come l'impostazione che viene data a scuola per insegnare le addizioni con il riporto, magari i genitori l'hanno imparato diversamente. Anche parlando appunto di argomenti più piccoli, quindi secondo me il ruolo dell'insegnante è sempre di riuscire ad accogliere il bambino, ma anche accogliere la famiglia in modo tale che ci sia fiducia reciproca e che il bambino non viva le due agenzie educative di cui parlava anche Samuele in modo competitivo.

In terms of the student teacher's experience, SGE was delivered to them by experts coming from outside the school in an informal and cold way.

... è un po' come il corso antidroga per paragonare, è la stessa cosa. Ti fa vedere tutte le problematiche collegate e ti dicono non farlo.

Therefore, they agreed that hiring experts to deliver SGE is not the best way of teaching about sexuality and gender. Experts such as psychologists and midwives don't have a personal relationship with the children that they meet and therefore the relationship is unbalanced. The children might feel discouraged about asking questions and sharing their experience with a stranger. The student teachers consequently agreed that it would be better to hire experts to educate teachers in the topics of SEG and how to deliver it in the most efficient way, rather than having the role of directly delivering it.

### 2.3 Conclusions

The principal aim of this study was to contribute to research on developing age-appropriate SGE in infant and primary schools in the Valle d'Aosta by investigating the points of view of key stakeholders who share a common educational role for children within two different agencies: those of the family and of the school. From an analysis of the data collected through focus group discussion and the identification of intersecting sociocultural, psychological and didactic factors involved, the principal themes that emerged can be summarized in terms of four main areas: (1) apprehension towards SGE in terms of what it consists of and how it can be delivered; (2) the

importance of who delivers SGE and what kind of preparation is necessary; (3) the impact of SGE in everyday life situations for children and adults, (4) the question of taking about specific body parts related to sexual characteristics and explicit situations related to sexuality.

### 1. Apprehension towards SGE

This theme recurred in all the groups of participants that participated in the data collection process, sometimes in similar and at other times in different ways. Both parents and teachers reported experiencing unease concerning how to approach the subject feeling that they wouldn't have enough information or the ability to communicate appropriate and exhaustive answers. Some participants noted a connection with their upbringing and their emotions when faced with speaking about sexuality and gender. This was both a question of not receiving any formal SGE in any level of schooling and not being able to talk to anybody about changes in their bodies, sexual attraction, sexual intercourse, or a range of other problems related to sexuality and gender.

The student teachers reported having found out information mostly through personal experience and the internet, but they wouldn't know how to plan and deliver lessons to schoolchildren about sexuality and gender due to the lack of education that they received on this topic. The teachers affirmed that for them it would be more difficult to deliver information about and discuss relationships, love, and affection, rather than describing how heterosexual sexual intercourse functioned. The parents stated that were afraid they wouldn't know how to talk about gender without the risk of enhancing gender stereotypes and how to keep the conversation inclusive. Some participants expressed that, while they would have preferred that their children received a more traditional sexuality and gender education, this would however not be possible because today the LGBTQ+ community is more visible and cannot be ignored. They also expressed concern some children might have difficult situations at home that introduce them early on to pornography and sexual violence earlier on.

However, despite their fears, all the participants agreed that the children should have knowledge about sexuality and gender earlier rather than later and that schools and families both have important roles to play.

## 2. The importance of who delivers SGE

This topic was widely discussed in all the focus groups. All the participants stated that they mostly experienced sexuality education through contact with an expert in the field that they had met through the school, the church, or a free clinic. The youngest participants reported being very embarrassed towards the expert that delivered SGE, especially since the topics are very sensitive and it's difficult to discuss it with strangers. Moreover, they all affirmed that the information that they received was very impersonal and cold.

The teachers agreed since they believed that they were the ones who should deliver SGE, but only after receiving an adequate training from experts such as therapists or midwives. They stated that adults can handle better talking to strangers about sensitive topics rather than children, especially because younger children feel the need to build an attachment, both affective and physical, to the adults that they encounter and who can play the role of significant others in the education. Therefore, they felt that they should be the ones to have an open discussion with the experts on the topic, rather than the children who would find this an unnecessarily stressful situation.

## 3. The impact of SGE in the everyday life

The participants in the focus groups all agreed that their level of knowledge on SGE topics and the lack of confidence they had in talking about it, impacted their everyday life. Some participants stated that, since they had had problems in talking about sexuality with their parents when they were younger, they were trying not to replicate the same pattern with the children they encountered, both as teachers and with their own children. Since they agreed that it was better to share their knowledge before the children were old enough to look for answers themselves, with all the risks this entails, they tried to normalize talking about body parts and

sexuality in their everyday life. Some participants shared their experiences and the conversations that they had with their children, giving other participants examples on how to handle in an open and appropriate way talking about sensitive topics such as childbirth, conception, and the menstrual cycle.

A theme that was discussed in connection with this topic concerned the spread of the social media and the easy access that young children have to the internet. The factor that worried the participants the most was that even with all the precautions that they could take a regards the use of devices, the children would find a way to access the internet through a peer or in an unsupervised environment. Some participants stated that children might see pictures or videos that are not intended for them. They then share their findings with peers in school, and therefore in some way children manage to get to the information that caregivers don't want them to have and the images that they don't want them to see.

The main reason for taking precautions on the internet was that most of the videos, pictures, and information that the children would find is not age-appropriate and therefore they would not understand it or be able to interpret it with the tools that they have. Moreover, the participants agreed that what is shown on the internet does not correspond to what people experience in real life and offers a distorted view of sexuality and gender. Therefore, if they are not guided through a process of SGE, children get an erroneous idea of what relationships in life are and should be when lived with the perspective of informed knowledge and mutual respect.

#### 4. Talking about specific body parts and explicit situations

Throughout the discussion with all the three groups, there were some differences and similarities concerning talking about specific body parts. The youngest participants had a wide vocabulary in this respect, and they didn't have any problems in using it. Their intention was clearly to use specific vocabulary to normalize the usage of appropriate terms, instead of using nicknames or childish words for intimate body parts. This is in line with much international literature that emphasizes the need to render explicit body parts within the context of children's

natural curiosity to explore them and thereby eliminate any form of shame or embarrassment.

As regards the other participants, on more than one occasion they had trouble using the correct term to define body parts. They preferred using nicknames or circumlocutions to express what they wanted to say. Moreover, while describing explicit situations in which they found themselves, they never used the specific words to describe it. For example, to describe situations in which the children were masturbating in class, they used words such as “dondolava avanti e indietro”, “andavano su dei siti eccetera” and so on. This highlights a difficulty that exists for their generation, even when speaking as adults.

Furthermore, it was interesting to see visually the reaction that those participants had whenever another participant used a specific word, concerning for example homosexuality. In one group especially, the discussion had to be guided by the researcher whenever the topic on homosexuality was brought up. In general, such a topic tended to be avoided or dropped by most participants. On the contrary, the student teachers, even when sometimes having difficulty with precise terminology while talking for example about gender issues or the LGBTQ+ community had a very different attitude. They clearly felt that it was important to know how to use specific terms properly and encourage their use with children.

In overall terms, what emerges from the focus groups reflects how the experiences and points of view of parents and teachers often demonstrate varying positions which generally show awareness of the need for SGE and of the complex issues involved in answering the question of *what* is appropriate and at *what* age and *how* SGE can be delivered. At the same time, views expressed by professionals working in the field of child development emphasize the need to build approaches based on current research findings and so establish SGE within educational policy and practice. Awareness of the complexity and the difficulties there may be in accepting such premises necessarily leads to the implementation of certain steps that will aim at successfully engaging teachers, parents, carers, and other stakeholders in the delivery of SGE. Examples of such steps are contained in the following guidelines

from the Healthy Schools project launched by the Croydon Local Education Authority in London:

- informing families in plenty of time that the lessons are due to be delivered
  - ensuring that they are given accurate information about the programme, what it contains, and how it will be taught
  - inviting parents/carers into school to view any films or resources that may be used
  - explaining the rationale behind the programme and its compliance with government policy
  - welcoming questions and concerns from families, answering them honestly and openly
- making clear arrangements for consultation with families when renewing and reviewing the school's SRE policy
- working in partnership with community or faith leaders
  - reassuring parents/carers that teachers' own beliefs will not influence their teaching of SRE
  - encouraging parents and carers to join any parent/teacher association or similar at your school
- (Healthy Schools, 2017).

## 2.4 Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

One limitation for this study was the difficulty in finding enough participants available to discuss sensitive topics with other people that they did not know well. Moreover, it was difficult to plan the meetings to have everybody who was willing in the same place at the same time. In some cases, participants canceled at the last minute due to unforeseen circumstances.

A second limitation regards the nature of some the responses by many participants. Few participants were willing to share the full story of their personal

experience and sexual biography precisely because these topics are very sensitive, and people are not used to sharing these aspects of their lives in front of a group of people that are largely strangers. Moreover, when it comes to talking about personal beliefs and questions of faith, people tend to keep it to themselves as a private matter, whether talking about what they believe or have faith in or discussing openly issues related to sexuality and gender.

A third limitation to this study can be seen as regarding the interpretation of the content of the discussion by a sole researcher. I conducted and transcribed the discussions of the participants and analyzed and interpreted their words. Moreover, it has not been possible to re-contact the participants to ask for clarification in some instances. Therefore, some of the comments might have been misinterpreted.

As a final consideration, my research has clearly been on a relatively small scale and cannot lead to definitive conclusions. It would be necessary to conduct more research on a wider scale with other research tools beyond that of the focus group to deepen insights into the question of developing age-appropriate approaches to SGE in infant and primary school contexts.

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