

Human sexuality education

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the research is to determine if experienced teachers feel competent to teach human sexuality and how they assess the importance of certain topics in human sexuality education. Additionally, the paper aims to assess which topics are rarely or never taught in human sexuality classes, as well as the reasons for such a choice. The research was conducted via online survey in the school year 2019/2020 and included 52 Nature and Biology teachers. The teachers used a 1 – 5 scale to mark their agreement with the statements related to their assessment of: (i) competence for teaching human sexuality, (ii) importance of topics in teaching human sexuality, and (iii) topics they rarely or never teach. An assessment of the effect of certain factors on the selection of topics teachers rarely or never teach was also conducted. The research found that teachers feel partially competent to teach human sexuality, they find the topics such as *Masturbation* and *Various sexual orientations (homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism...)* important, but also list them, in addition to *Emotions* and *Violence in relationships*, as topics they rarely or never teach. The main reasons listed for not teaching certain topics related to human sexuality are lack of time to conduct the lesson and the fact that certain topics are not defined by curriculum outcomes. Teachers mostly believe that the religion and attitudes of students and themselves do not affect the choice of topics in the human sexuality classes, but those with more experience mostly state that the attitudes of society and parents partly affect the choice of topics in human sexuality classes.

Keywords: *comprehensive sexuality education; human sexuality; competence; value system*

INTRODUCTION

Human sexuality education is an extremely important and necessary part of education. It could also be defined as age-appropriate, accurate, and realistic approach to teaching human sexuality that includes both positive and negative aspects of human sexuality (Goldman, 2011; Elia, 2000). Human sexuality education needs to be a part of school education system, in addition to parental and societal education (Elia, 2000; Sabah et al., 2010), because majority of students spend their adolescent period (period of reaching sexual maturity) in school, where they get timely, objective, scientifically based information about sexuality, i.e., during a period when they need this information most to improve their existing knowledge and develop their own identity and value system (Goldman, 2011).

Educational outcomes of the curriculum of Science and Biology and educational expectations of the cross-curricular theme Health in the domains Physical Health and Mental and Social Health (MZO, 2019) include topics related to human sexuality (anatomy and physiology of the reproductive system, hygiene, responsible sexual behavior, i.e., the prevention of unwanted pregnancy and protection against sexually transmitted diseases and infections). However, there are topics such as sexual and gender equality and tolerance towards sexual minorities (Paić, 2020) that are not included in the curriculum. Given the shortcomings and difficulties in conducting comprehensive sexuality education, the aim of this research is to determine how competent experienced teachers feel to teach human sexuality and how they assess the importance of certain topics in human sexuality classes. This research also aims to determine which topics experienced teachers rarely or never teach, as well as the reasons for such a choice.

METHODS

The research was conducted in the school year 2019/2020 and it included 50 female and two male Science and Biology teachers. Most of the respondents (33%) have more than 15 years of teaching experience. The same number of respondents have between 10 and 15 years of teaching experience (33%). There are 12% of teachers with 5 to 10 years of teaching experience, 13% with 2 to 5 years of teaching experience, and 10% with less than 2 years of teaching experience.

A closed-type survey designed for this research was conducted online. It consisted of 4 questions and 37 statements. The initial part of the survey (4 questions) examined the structure of the observed group (gender, age, position, and teaching experience). The second part of the survey contained 8 statements. The respondents needed to rate these statements on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = I completely disagree, 2 = I disagree, 3 = I neither agree nor disagree, 4 = I agree, 5 = I completely agree) to self-assess competence for human sexuality education. The third part of the survey was the assessment of the importance of certain topics in human sexuality education, where respondents marked on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = not important at all, 2 = slightly important, 3 = quite important, 4 = important, 5 = very important) how important each of the ten offered topics is in human sexuality education. In addition, the respondents marked the topics (of the ten offered) they rarely or never teach. In the final part of the survey respondents chose the reasons why a topic on human sexuality is rarely or never taught. For this, respondents rated on a scale from 1 to 5 (1 = I strongly disagree, 2 = I disagree, 3 = I neither agree nor disagree, 4 = I agree, 5 = I strongly agree) the reason (9 were offered) why they rarely or never teach a particular topic. The selection of the described assessment scales was made according to Cohen et al. (2007).

Descriptive statistics was used for the analysis of each part of the survey. In addition, for some statements, the distribution of answers was analyzed regarding the work experience of the teacher. The correlation between the individual claims and work experience was determined by the Chi-square test. The Cronbach's coefficient (α) was calculated for the survey, which is 0.79 for the second part of the survey, and 0.75 for the third part of the survey. That is interpreted as an acceptably reliable survey (79%, i.e., 75% of the variance is explained by the results, while 21%, i.e., 25% of the variance could be attributed to error). Statistical package Statistica 12 (Quest Software Inc., Aliso Viejo, CA, USA) was used for the analysis.

RESULTS

In the self-assessment of the competence for teaching human sexuality respondents on average completely agree that they emphasize understanding and focus on the pedagogic component of human sexuality education. Participants on average neither agree nor disagree with assessing the satisfaction with the choice of topics on human sexuality determined by the curriculum. On average, participants agree with the statements related to acquiring initial education on human sexuality, professional training related to human sexuality, the contribution of the relevant curricula to evidence-based sexual health education, and how much they, as Biology teachers can teach (and educate) students about healthy relationships, respecting diversity, preventing violence in relationships, and similar topics.

In assessing the importance of certain topics as well as the topics they do not teach, participants rated majority of them as very important, while *Masturbation* and *Various sexual orientations*

(*homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism...*) are found important. Although these topics are considered important, they are rarely or never taught. Additionally, *Violence in relationships, Emotions* and developing a *Positive image of oneself and one's own body* are also topics that some respondents rarely or never teach.

In the last part of the survey, the respondents assessed the extent to which certain factors affect the topics they rarely or never teach in human sexuality classes. They neither agree nor disagree with most factors offered as reasons they rarely or never teach certain topics. On average, they disagree that factors *My own religion* and *My values and attitudes* affect the choice of topics they rarely or never teach. *Lack of time to conduct the lesson* and *Topic is not defined in the curricular outcomes* are factors respondents on average agree to affect the choice of topics they rarely or never teach. Also, some respondents, regardless of work experience, agree that parents' attitudes affect the choice of topics teachers rarely or never teach, apart from respondents with between 5 and 10 years of teaching experience.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Paić (2020) analyzed curricula of Science and Biology and curriculum of the cross-curricular theme Health (MZO, 2019) and concluded that these curricula cover topics related to the anatomy and physiology of the reproductive system and prevention of irresponsible sexual behavior. The remaining aspects of human sexuality such as emotional, psychosocial, or ethical aspect, which, in addition to the anatomy of the reproductive system, constitute a comprehensive education on human sexuality, are not covered at all by educational expectations and outcomes or are covered to a very small extent. We assume that teachers recognize the shortcomings of the curriculum in comprehensive sexual education based on the assessment of their satisfaction of the choice of topics and given the insight into the curricula.

Teachers' assessment of the knowledge acquired during initial education and additional professional training, as well as the fact that they focus on pedagogical aspect of sexual education in teaching, corroborates the research of Eisenberg et al. (2010) and Ahmed et al. (2000), which indicate that additional teacher training in human sexuality education increases existing knowledge and has a positive effect on self-confidence when teaching human sexuality. Also, Iwu et al. (2011) emphasize that the teachers' high level of knowledge of human sexuality leads to better education of children.

Masturbation, Various sexual orientations (homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism...), Violence in relationships and *Emotions* are topics that belong to the emotional and psychosocial aspect of human sexuality which, as determined by Paić (2020), are not covered or are insufficiently covered in the curriculum of Nature and Biology as well as in educational expectations of the cross-curricular theme Health (MZO, 2019). It is therefore not surprising that teachers agree that the outcome-specificity factor influences the choice of topic for human sexuality education.

Teachers' assessment of the effect of factors is consistent with the research of Haignere et al. (1996), which found that lack of time to conduct the lesson and the availability of quality materials are the main reasons for not teaching certain topics. Also, topics that are rarely or never chosen are not covered by the curricular outcomes (therefore they are not present in textbooks), which presupposes lack of quality materials and that is an important factor influencing the quality of human sexuality education and the choice of topics (Depauli and Plaute, 2018).

This research has shown that teachers feel partially competent to teach human sexuality, they focus on pedagogical aspect of human sexuality education in their teaching, and not simply on the content. *Masturbation* and *Various sexual orientations (homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenderism...)* are considered important, but are rarely or never taught, just like *Emotions* and *Violence in relationships*. *Lack of time to conduct a lesson* and *The topic is not determined by the curricular outcomes* are the two most common factors affecting teachers' decision not to teach a particular topic.

Although the research included relatively small number of teachers, it may suggest that the Croatian education system is not focused on comprehensive sexual education. It also provides an opportunity to gain insight into the critical analysis of the curriculum of Science and Biology classes as well as the curriculum of the cross-curricular theme Health from the aspect of assessing the integrity of the approach to sexual education. It also provides a description of a comprehensive education and suggests topics that could guide teachers in planning human sexuality education not only from a biological and cognitive aspect, but also from an emotional and social aspect.

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