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Effective sex education strategies for secondary schools

A diary-based thesis from an international school in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

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Sex education is mandatory in many countries around the world, but the extent to which it is delivered effectively varies significantly. Schools face several challenges on a cultural, political, organizational and interpersonal level. This thesis aims to understand how secondary schools can approach sex education using more innovative pedagogy, placing student agency at the centre of the process, and engaging parents in meaningful conversations. As a diary-based thesis, all the tasks that have informed this work have been conducted at Copenhagen International School and are used to explore different solutions, using the existing literature to compare and contrast the validity of different approaches. Focus groups and interviews were used to collect qualitative data from several stakeholders within the organisation as well as a sex education expert from the Danish sex education organisation.

Teacher comfortability and skill is one of the factors that most impacts the student experience, suggesting that teacher training is a fundamental strategy to implement or enhance a sex education programme. Upskilling teachers helps them not only feel more comfortable and confident discussing sexuality with students but also helps them design learning experiences using innovative solutions such as game-based and blended learning.

In order to ensure that teachers are providing adequate information to students, schools must operate within a well established, articulated and written framework, which includes policy on how to respond in specific situations. It is also important that parents trust the school in order to minimise resistance from the parent community and strength the relationship between the school and the community it serves.

Student agency should be promoted as much as possible. Involving students in all aspects of teaching and learning has a positive impact on the quality of the programme but also on the relationship between teacher and students. This relationship is particularly important within the field of sex education.

This thesis proposed ways in which Copenhagen International School and secondary schools in general can move forward in their journey of developing an effective sex education strategy.

Keywords: sex education, sexuality, comprehensive sexuality education, adolescents, sexual health

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1 INTRODUCTION

Sex education has existed in schools for over 50 years (UNESCO et al., 2018). In order to understand the current state of sex education, it is fundamental to look at its historical and cultural development, the different roles it has played and the factors that have influenced it. By acknowledging that journey we are able to situate ourselves in time and place, and in order to move forward we must critically examine the most recent evolving trends in our understanding of human sexuality as well as modern pedagogy and educational priorities.

Over the course of the twentieth century, the focus of sex education fluctuated according to political and cultural shifts, and also in response to some of the major events happening at the time, for example World War II (Sauerteig & Davidson, 2009). In Europe, at the beginning of the twentieth century it was the norm to use sex education as a way of passing on Christian family values, including traditional gender norms. During the war, when families were split up, sex education had the important task to help and equip young people with the ability to control their sexual urges, as sex outside of marriage was condemned, and abstinence encouraged. After the war, sex education was crucial in re-stabilising sexual order and reinforcing gender roles. Freeman (2008) explains that in fact “sex education has meant different things to different people over time” (p. 4), and this has been evident for example through the various terms used to describe it over the years: social hygiene, family living, human relations education.

During the twentieth century several countries were concerned that sex education could corrupt young people, deviate and distract them from their duties to the state and lead to immoral behaviours (Sauerteig & Davidson, 2009). This concern was shared among communist and socialist countries like the Soviet Union and East Germany, but equally among countries where the church had great influence on civil society, for example in Scotland. However, the way in which countries responded to these concerns varied significantly. On one hand East Germany believed that by encouraging more socialisation between girls and boys, including allowing nude bathing at beaches, young people would be more in control of their sexual desires, and on the other hand England was highly conservative in its approach, inhibiting conversations around sexuality and sexual exposure as much as possible. One might suggest that these historical journeys can be identified in the way that sex education is happening in different parts of Europe today.

By looking at sex education from a political, social and historical perspective, we are able to identify the multiple and varying functions that it has served and to some degree still does. Up until 1960,

the moral aspect of sex was the main priority for instruction, leaving the biological part out of the learning. However, after the 1960s a much more biomedical approach was taken and it even became compulsory in some schools. The problem with this was that it became very risk-based and sex was portrayed as a negative, highly risky behaviour that could lead to illness and disease. Pleasure and eroticism were left out of the picture leaving students with limited resources to learn about this aspect of their sexuality. Much like today, this led young people in the late twentieth century to search for information elsewhere. Magazines, films, peers and even siblings became the main source of knowledge about how sex worked and how it could feel good (Sauerteig & Davidson, 2009). Today the internet plays this role.

By analysing the historical development of sex education and how different countries responded to certain issues we can appreciate how important context is when thinking about sex education. The social and political context of an organisation can strongly determine the way in which sex education is delivered; whether it's a risk-based approach, a morality-based approach, a biomedical based approach or any other type of approach is partly due to the context in which it operates. Sanchez, Quellar and Guerrero (2021) emphasise this idea when discussing contextual barriers to sex education in Mexico. However, we must also look at the contextual issues in terms of time, not just place. If in the twentieth century the world faced issues like the World Wars and was being shaped by the Women's Liberation Movement, today societies are operating under vastly different conditions due to scientific and technological development and globalisation. Understanding how educators and educational organisations can respond to these contextual shifts is the driving force behind my interest in this topic. It is my understanding that young people's lives are massively affected by the way in which they learn about their own sexuality and sexuality in general.

According to the World Health Organization (n.d.), sexual health is a fundamental part of people's overall health and well-being, and is partly dependent on people's access to comprehensive, high-quality information about sex and sexuality, among other factors. Such information can be disseminated through comprehensive sexuality education programmes, which Starrs et al. (2018), suggest is one of several measures that countries should adopt in order to ensure sexual and reproductive health and rights for all. UNESCO (2015) has also identified comprehensive sexuality education as an important strategy to improve gender equality, one of the United Nations Sustainability Goals for 2030. In her book about women's health and human rights, Murray (2013) explains the relationship between gender inequality and some of the major threats to humanity, including poverty, climate change, HIV, amongst others. Comprehensive sexuality education is a

crucial element of young people's education and schools must ensure that their students have access to unbiased, evidence-based information.

Equally, we are currently living in a digital age where young people have access to almost unlimited information online. Navigating the quality and reliability of such information requires sound research skills, critical thinking and guidance, particularly for younger children. These are competencies that need to be addressed at school, and specifically in sex education programmes in order to empower students to make responsible decisions around contraception, sexual behaviour and pornography consumption; all of which have a significant impact on young people's lives and development. According to Tsaliki (2011), "pornography, in particular, has been singled out for concern, with arguments including religious and moral objections on the grounds that it corrupts societal values, feminist criticism that pornography objectifies women and encourages male violence, and child welfare concerns that it affects children's sexual and emotional development" (p. 294). Failing to address pornography in education, namely in a sex education programme, leaves young people navigating an extremely vast web of information at a time when their brains are not yet fully developed or mature, and with a limited skillset.

Furthermore, according to Deep (2015) teenagers see the internet as the main platform to gather information and to communicate with one another. Conversations that used to happen in person, are now happening online. This is particularly true for sexuality related topics, which is evident for example when discussing consent, an aspect of sexuality which some countries have attempted to address via a mobile app (Danaher, 2018).

When teenagers' main form of communication is through a screen, face to face interactions become the exception and not the norm. This can lead to difficulties with interpersonal skills, such as verbal and non-verbal communication and active listening, which according to Davila et al. (2017) are fundamental in maintaining healthy relationships.

Although this is a theme that spans across all areas of education, sex education is perhaps one that gets hard hit by the lack of innovation in what we teach and the way we teach it. In the United States, for example, the national congress continues to fund the Abstinence Only until Marriage (AOUM) approach, which is still promoted across the country, even though there is evidence that it is ineffective in achieving its proposed outcomes (Hall et al., 2016). In China, "the structure and themes of many sex education discourses have resembled aspects of those in the 1920s" (Aresu, 2009, p. 536). Across the world, sex education continues to lag behind the fast-paced technology that students in the developed world live in. As a sex educator I am invested in understanding what the current generation of young people want with regards to sex education and how they envision

it. That way we can respond to their actual needs as opposed to the needs of young people who lived in a time that no longer exists. With this in mind, my research question is: how can schools adequately respond to the current and evolving needs of young people regarding their sexuality education?

2 CONTEXT

As a diary-based thesis, this document explores both the existing literature on the topic of sex education, as well as my experiences and tasks as a sex educator. Copenhagen International School, the organisation at which I work, has served as the host for all the research conducted; part of it being connected to my job, and part of it specifically for research. In order to understand the implications of the tasks carried out as part of my profession, it is important to understand the context in which they have taken place. This section aims to contextualise the reader, providing an overview of the organisation, its stakeholders, my own professional competencies and the current state of school's sex education programme.

2.1 The school and its environment

Copenhagen International School (CIS) is a private non-profit organisation that educates children and young people from pre-kindergarten to grade 12. Its vision is “to educate champions of a just and sustainable world” through the three programmes of the International Baccalaureate curriculum - Primary Years Programme (PYP), Middle Years Programme (MYP) and Diploma Programme (DP). Copenhagen International School is a values-based organisation; integrity, growth, inclusion, compassion and creativity are the five values that guide the school in its efforts to develop the potential of each learner. Cultural diversity and mutual respect are also at the centre of the school's ethos, with over 80 nationalities in the student body and staff. ‘Learning to build community’ is part of the school's mission statement placing high emphasis on the families that the school serves, as well as its local surroundings.

As an international school in Copenhagen, CIS caters to both the international and local communities of the capital of Denmark. The families that make up the school community are a mixture of diplomats, expatriate employees, researchers and local families who have chosen an international education for their children. Parents of CIS students are generally highly committed to their children's education with a strong desire to ensuring their children have an academically rigorous programme with a global outlook. These families are often multilingual and highly educated, working for large international organisations such as the United Nations and the World Health Organisation, or hold government positions at their respective embassies.

CIS is governed by a Board of Governors who act as the legal authorising body of the school and operate in line with the school's constitution. The members of the Board work on a voluntary basis and their main goal is to ensure the fiscal health of the school and maintain good governance and risk management. The Board does not get involved with operational decisions, but acts as an advisory team to the Director, who is the person overseeing the day-to-day operations of the organisation.

Although CIS is a private school, it operates in a highly unionised environment; it is subsidised by the Danish Ministry of Education and it must work within the rules established in the national agreement. The school also signs a local agreement with the different unions that represent teachers, agreeing on issues such as salaries, working hours, teacher contract and task portfolios. For example, the school cannot hire people on a fixed term contract unless it is associated with an already existing employee's absence. So, for example, if the school wanted to hire a sex education expert for six months to help develop their sex education programme, it would not be able to do that on top of its already existing staff. Although these constraints have little impact on the curriculum itself (other than making it mandatory to teach Danish), they can limit some of the options regarding the organisation of teaching the different subject areas, including sex education. In less structured environments, decision makers may find that they have a lot more flexibility when it comes to teacher contracts, task allocation and salary.

It is also important to note that as a school in the European Union, it must comply with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines. Again, this does not necessarily have a direct impact on the teaching and learning that happens within the school, but it does influence the school's ability to use educational software. If the software being used shares any personal data then the school and the provider must sign a data agreement policy. This can be costly and therefore constricting when choosing which software to purchase for educational purposes. For instance, if CIS wanted to use a digital platform for sex education from the United States, it could be quite difficult to agree on the data policy because the United States have different laws around data than those established in the European Union.

In terms of the workplace competence requirements, CIS' employees must be mission-aligned, qualified and able to speak English. All employees must abide by the school's professional practice standards, as well as its code of conduct.

2.2 Stakeholders and interests

CIS has many stakeholders, as is the case with many organisations that operate in the international market. Below is a map that outlines the different stakeholders and a table describing the relationship between each stakeholder and the school:

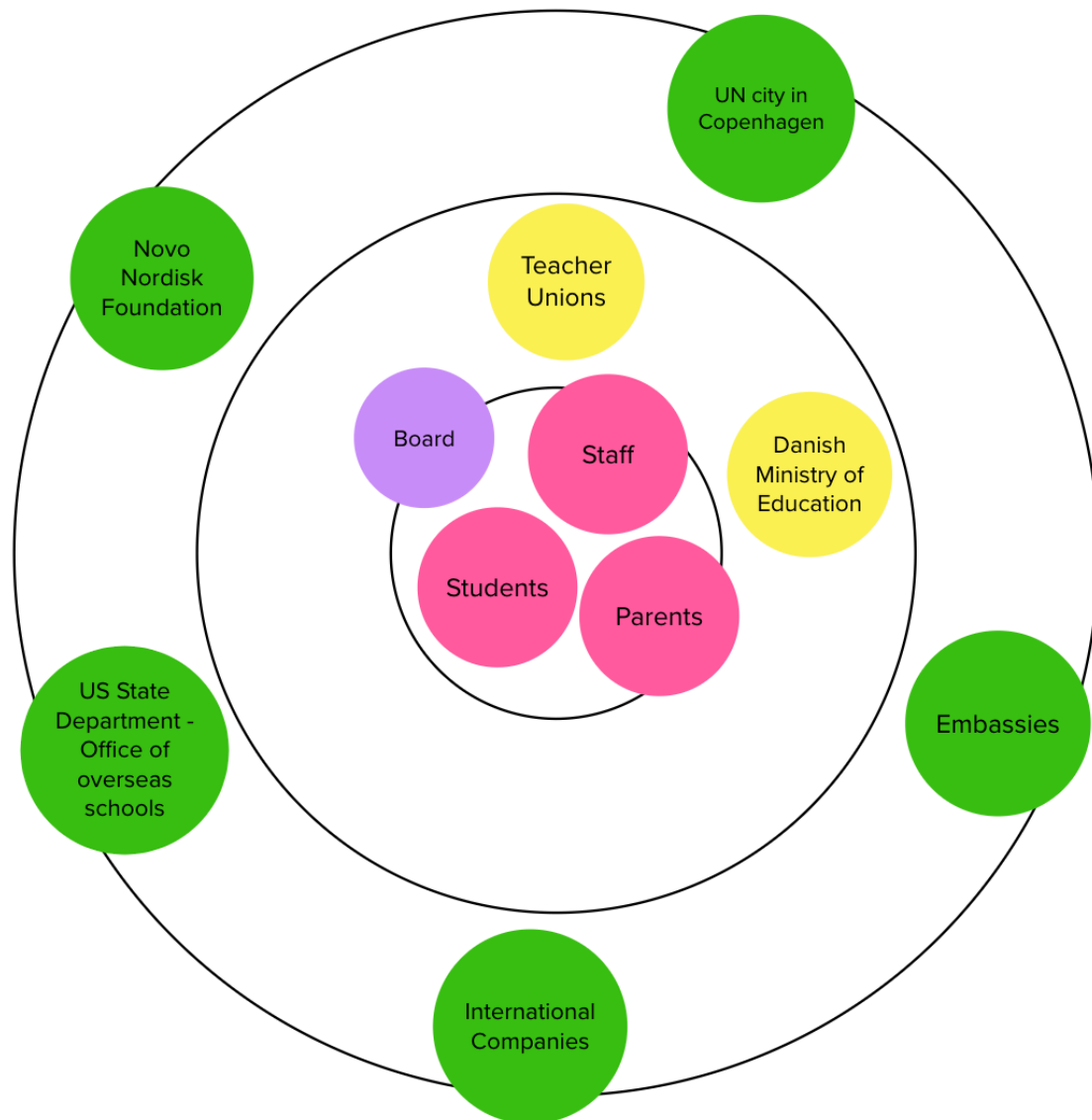


Figure 1: Stakeholder map of Copenhagen International School

Table 1: Relationship between stakeholders and Copenhagen International School

Stakeholder	Interests/involvement with the school
Students	Students are the 'users' of the school's product or service. The school's aim is to educate children and young people, so it is in its best interest that the students are satisfied. The relationship between the students, their parents and the school is also important to note as it is the parents who pay for the school, even though the students are the ones benefitting directly.
Parents	Parents are the paying client. They contribute to the school's financial success by paying the yearly fees. As mentioned above, the relationship between the parents, the students and the school is important due to the fact that the paying customer is not the actual user. It is in the school's best interest to keep both groups satisfied and it is in the parents' best interest that the school is successful as this directly impacts their children's education.
Staff - teaching staff	The teaching staff is a diverse group of individuals who come from multiple backgrounds and countries. They are responsible for designing, delivering and managing the curriculum within their particular area of impact, as well as caring for student wellbeing. Teaching staff see CIS as their main source of income and therefore rely on the school for their livelihood. This implies there is a vested interest in ensuring the school is successful and keeping its customers satisfied.
Staff - non-teaching staff	The non-teaching staff support the daily operations and administration of the school. Just like the teaching staff, non-teaching staff also rely on the school for their livelihood, implying a vested interest in the financial health of the school. This group impacts students in a less direct way.
Staff - leadership	The leadership team of the school is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the remaining members of staff are completing their tasks, whether they be teaching, administrative or of any other nature. They are also the decision makers of the school and have the power to make changes at a curriculum, structural and organisational level.
Board	The board ensures that the director of the school is leading the organisation in accordance with its values and constitutional policies. They are involved in fiscal responsibilities, strategic direction and long term sustainability of the school. They do not get involved with the daily operations of the school.
Danish Ministry of Education	The Danish Ministry of Education subsidises the school. The only implications this has on curriculum is that it is therefore mandatory to teach Danish. The subsidy also means the school must meet the requirements of the national agreements of the major teacher unions.
Unions	The unions work collaboratively with the school leadership team to ensure that teachers' working conditions are met according to the national and local agreements.
Novo Nordisk Foundation	A charity that donates money to the school to give scholarships to children of researchers and academics who are brought to Denmark
Embassies	Embassies are able to attract talent to Copenhagen partly because CIS exists
UN City in Copenhagen	UN city in Copenhagen is able to be as large as it is partly because of CIS; United Nations - pays tuition for their workers children
International Companies	International companies are able to attract talent to Copenhagen partly because CIS exists
Office of Overseas Schools (US State Department)	CIS is a state supported school. This means CIS is the default school for children of employees of governmental agencies of the United States of America. CIS receives an annual grant/donation to support the school in providing quality education of approximately forty thousand dollars.

Relationship between stakeholders and the school

As is represented in figure 1- stakeholder map of CIS, different groups of people have varying levels of influence and interest in the education offer and experience at CIS. In the centre we have the main group - the students - the people that the school serves directly, together with their families. The staff are also at the centre as they have a direct impact on the school as well as a high level of interest seeing as their livelihood depends on the financial success of the school. The staff can be subdivided into three groups: teaching staff, non-teaching staff and leadership. These three groups work together to ensure the school runs smoothly and therefore the interaction between them can affect the educational experience of the students and the parent satisfaction. From a sex education perspective, the interaction between the teaching staff and leadership team is crucial as either of these groups can be significant blockers to an effective sex education programme. Ultimately, all decisions around the educational programme that the school offers are down to the leadership team. However, it is the teaching staff that needs to execute these decisions, and therefore in order for them to lead to success, both groups need to be aligned. Equally if the teaching staff does not have the support of the leadership team, then complex situations may become difficult to navigate, particularly if dealing with parents. The interaction between parents and staff is also a crucial one, particularly when it comes to sex education. Pop and Rusu (2015) describe it as a shared responsibility and one that requires collaboration in order for the parents to adequately support their children.

Moving slightly out from the centre we have the board. Although the board technically does not interfere with the daily operations of the school, it does work closely with the director to ensure the smooth running of the organisation. This means that if the director were to make a decision that the board does not agree with, it could be refuted. This usually has implications on high stakes, strategic decisions and less on curricular matters.

The second circle represented on the stakeholder map includes the Danish Ministry of Education and the unions. As mentioned previously, Denmark is a highly unionised country and the dynamics between the unions, the ministry of education and schools can be quite complex (Greve & Sløk, 2020). The influence that these groups have on the school do not directly impact the curriculum at CIS other than requiring the school to teach Danish. So, in terms of sex education there should not be any barriers at this level other than around teaching contracts, working hours and salaries. Every year CIS and the local union representatives negotiate a local agreement, where further information around teachers' work is settled. This document is signed once a year and therefore any changes

that the school intends to make can only come into effect after the agreement is signed. This adds a time constraint which can make it difficult to act on immediate needs.

The stakeholders on the outer circle of the map have no direct impact on the curriculum at the school but rather provide financial support in one way or another that helps the school provide quality education to its students.

2.3 Author's competencies & professional development

Currently, I am a secondary school Physical and Health Education (PHE) teacher and Subject Team Coordinator at CIS with the Middle Years Programme of the International Baccalaureate. This means that I oversee and manage the Physical and Health Education department from grade 6 to 10, as well as teach in grades 9 and 10. I am also an advisor (tutor) to grade 10, and am therefore responsible for monitoring and caring for a group of students' wellbeing and educational progress.

As part of my role within the PHE department, I have been reviewing and developing the curriculum, specifically in the area of health education. I have worked at CIS for 6 years and in my time at the school there has been a strong focus on the physical education part of the subject but not so much on the health part. So, in order to make the subject more holistic and relevant, I have proposed within the department that we look at our health education programme and develop it to include some of the major health topics that are specific to adolescence, such as mental health, nutrition, and sexual health, in line with the report on the challenges in adolescent health care by the Institute of Medicine et al. (2007).

In order to do this, I have engaged in several professional development opportunities with the objective of understanding more about sexual health, and how to teach young people about sexual health. These efforts have included single courses from multiple universities focusing on gender, women's health and sexual rights, but also a post-graduate degree in sexuality education and sexual wellbeing. The research required for this thesis has also contributed to my professional development, including extensive literature review, multiple focus groups and interviews, as well as feedback from students and parents about my sex education teaching practices. Collaborative work with the counselling department has helped develop my ability to respond to specific student needs as well as my ability to discuss sexual harassment, assault and abuse. Equally, acting as the supervisor for the student-led club GSA (Gender-Sexuality Alliance) has assisted me in tackling LGBTQ+ issues that fall under the umbrella of sex education.

In terms of competencies, I have significantly developed my sexual literacy, meaning my ability to discuss sexuality both in terms of vocabulary and language but also in terms of cultural sensitivity and awareness. This competency is crucial when working in the field of sex education as it is imperative that I am able to engage in conversations about a variety of topics but also with a variety of audiences. This competency has been developed through the aforementioned courses, but also over time as I became more experienced in teaching sex education to multiple groups of students. Creativity and innovation have also played a significant role in my ability to work within sex education at CIS. When I first started addressing sex education at my workplace there was nothing established, so everything that has been done so far has come from my own creative process. This has included designing the curriculum itself but also looking into innovative ways to deliver the curriculum such as through podcasts, peer-learning strategies, trust-based group discussions and interdisciplinary learning. All of these strategies will be further explained in the diary entry about pedagogical innovation in sex education.

2.4 The current state of sex education at CIS

Currently, Copenhagen International School does not have an official sex education programme, policy or formal written curriculum. It is taught by some teachers who believe it is important but there is no agreed upon vertical or horizontal alignment. As part of my research, I created an audit to try and understand if teachers are delivering aspects of sex education within their subjects without necessarily realising that they are doing so. This audit was done collaboratively with teachers from all subject areas of the Middle Years Programme and focused on grades 6 to 10. It used the key concepts outlined by UNESCO et al. (2018) in their International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education. This audit allowed me to get a more realistic picture of the content that is actually being delivered in the classrooms despite the lack of a formal programme. Below is a summary of the results of this audit.

Table 2: Areas of the curriculum that address sex education topics

UNESCO key concepts	Grade 6	Grade 7	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10
1. Relationships	LA	LA	L&L Advisory	-	-
2. Values, rights, culture and sexuality	-	-	Science	I&S	-
3. Understanding gender	-	LA Design	LA Science	IDU:I&S PHE	+ L&L
4. Violence and staying safe	-	-	-	-	PHE
5. Skills for health and wellbeing	-	-	Science	-	PHE
6. The human body and development	Science	-	Science LA	LA	-
7. Sexuality and sexual behaviour	Science	-	Science Advisory PHE	-	PHE
8. Sexual and reproductive health	-	-	Science	PHE	

Abbreviations & notes:

PHE - Physical and Health Education

I&S - Individuals and Societies

L&L - Language and Literature

LA - Language Acquisition (includes different languages - not all students have the same)

IDU - Interdisciplinary Unit

In terms of policy, CIS has no formal written document outlining the school's approach to sex education, nor does it have an agreed upon strategy to deal with parents who may wish to withdraw their children from sex education classes. This means that teachers are left to navigate these situations at their own discretion, leading to potential inconsistencies within the school and also placing teachers in a position where they must make decisions that they are not necessarily prepared for. However, from my own experience dealing with these situations, the leadership team of the school have always been available to discuss how to proceed and an agreement is easily reached. Nevertheless, dealing with each case individually and constantly having to ask for guidance is time and energy consuming, all of which could be avoided if the school had a formal policy about participation in sex education. According to Gonzalez et al. (2017), the inexistence of sex education policies can lead not only to programme inconsistencies, but also to students

receiving medically inaccurate information. This study focused on state level policies in the United States of America, which of course is a different context to that of Copenhagen International School. As an independent private school in Denmark, CIS is responsible for ensuring that it abides by the country's legislation but at the same time does not have the organisational support that public schools have through national organisations that ensure programmes are being delivered. This is a challenge for CIS.

As far as professional development is concerned, CIS currently does not take a proactive approach to ensuring its teachers are prepared to teach sex education. As mentioned previously, there is no formal sex education curriculum, meaning a variety of teachers are taking it upon themselves to teach about these issues. How these teachers are going about this is not necessarily known to the decision makers.

On the other hand, it is possible that there is an expectation that the health education teachers such as myself, are skilled in addressing this aspect of health education. However, this is not the case because there are very limited training opportunities for health education specifically. There are seven physical and health education teachers at CIS, all of which are trained physical education teachers, but haven't necessarily done any training in health education and if they have it has been *ad hoc*, voluntarily or informally.

As we can see, CIS has not yet invested in formalising its sex education programme. Why might this be? There are several barriers to good sex education and CIS is certainly up against many of them, but not all.

According to Leo and Wiley (2019), barriers to effective sex education can be categorised into three groups: policy-level barriers, organisational-level barriers and interpersonal-level barriers. The policy-level barriers include how sex education is written into national or local policies, whether it is mandatory or not and what kind of approach is permitted. In Texas for example, there is an abstinence-only policy, making it very difficult to address contraception and birth control. At CIS, these barriers do not exist as in Denmark sex education is delivered from a sex-positive perspective and is compulsory (Jakobsen et al., 2020). It begins at an early age and allows children and young people to explore sexuality in a safe environment. So, from a policy standpoint, CIS is working within the ideal environment to deliver good sex education. However, it is important to remember that CIS is an international school and therefore caters for a significant number of nationalities other than Danish. It is therefore possible that the policies are difficult to implement on the grounds of cultural barriers within the school.

The organisational-level barriers refer to the lack of teacher training, school culture and having internal teachers deliver the curriculum as opposed to external groups. At CIS, school culture may pose some challenges due to its cultural and religious diversity, however this could also help the school progress with a sex education programme as the less conservative families could act as huge influencing forces in driving this agenda. In more homogenous communities, it can be very difficult to change mentalities as there is a huge majority opposing change. This is highlighted by Sanchez, Quellar and Guerrero (2021) as they attempt to deliver sex education in Colima, Mexico and are confronted by significant cultural barriers due to the fact that it is a small conservative state.

As for teacher training, as explored above, CIS fails to ensure that its teachers are skilled and qualified to teach sex education. This is not surprising when placed against the existing literature as it is mentioned time and time again as one of the biggest barriers to effective sex education. Leos and Wiley (2019) found this to be the case in the United States, as did Thammaraksa et al. (2014) in Thailand and Kuštreba, Elezović and Štulhofer (2015) in Croatia. Lack of training in this area leaves teachers feeling vulnerable, underprepared and nervous about addressing sexual health with young people, resulting in avoidance. At CIS, this avoidance seems to be shared by the leadership team as there have been no formal efforts to ensure that teachers are qualified in this area. It is possible however that it is an unintentional avoidance that stems from a lack of understanding about health education in general, and a somewhat safety net that being an international school provides when deviating from what is expected in the host country - in this case Denmark. Although CIS undergoes several processes of accreditation and inspection, none of them will cover this topic as the school's curriculum is not expected to match the Danish one and the International Baccalaureate does not have any specific provision for sex education. All of these factors combined make it the ideal scenario for sex education to be left off the grid.

The interpersonal-level barriers include the uncomfortable nature of the topic where nobody seems to want to talk about it - both at home and at school; blurry boundaries between facts and values; and teachers fearing backlash from parents. These interpersonal barriers are of course reinforced by the lack of training as well as the lack of strong policies backing them up in case of parental backlash. Equally, the ability to draw boundaries between facts and values in class is something that can be developed with training, mentoring and practice. So, in order to break down the interpersonal barriers it might be prudent to address the policy and organisational barriers first.

3 PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how Copenhagen International School, and secondary schools in general, can approach sex education in a way that effectively meets the needs of students today. The broader research question for this thesis is therefore: How can schools adequately respond to the current and evolving needs of young people regarding their sexuality education?

This can be subdivided into several inquiry questions:

- What are the needs of young people today?
- How do current events affect the way we educate young people about their sexuality?
- What should young people's sexuality education encompass?
- How do current trends in education affect the way we teach sex education?

Based on these questions, I have outlined the following learning objectives for myself as a teaching professional and a researcher:

- To understand what students want from their sex education
- To understand what parents want for their children's sex education
- To understand the rationale behind school leadership team's decision making around sex education
- To understand the barriers to sex education
- To understand the historical, social and cultural context of sex education
- To understand different pedagogical approaches to sex education
- To propose a sex education strategy for Copenhagen International School

In terms of the organisation of this thesis, and in order to address all the inquiry questions, I have produced a diary that guides the reader through a 3-year journey of professional experimentation, analysed against the data collected and literature reviewed specifically for this thesis. The diary includes four entries, each addressing a particular topic that is important to consider when thinking about sex education. These follow no chronological order but instead reflect on the different pieces that compose a sex education strategy or programme.

I conclude this thesis with a final reflection on the ideas explored in the diary, as well as a proposal for how CIS, or any other school, could move forward to improve their provision of sex education for secondary school students.

4 DATA COLLECTION

In order to understand some of the main stakeholders' experiences with sex education at Copenhagen International School, I carried out three focus group sessions with students, parents and decision makers. Each focus group was 45 minutes long and was carried out during the months of January and February in 2022. In each one we addressed four topics: organisation of sex education, pedagogy, content, and challenges to sex education. These topics were chosen based on the inquiry questions and objectives stated in section 3, but also because they represent the four aspects that helps us understand a programme: how it is set up; how it is taught; what is taught; and what is blocking it. Although the topics remained the same across the different groups, some questions varied to ensure they remained relevant to that particular group of people. The following table shows an example of questions asked in the different focus groups for one of the topics:

Table 3: Example of questions asked at different focus groups

Topic: Organisation of sex education	
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What are your thoughts on single sex versus mixed sex education (all genders together)?- Where would you place sex education in the curriculum? (eg. advisory, a particular subject, other options?)
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What are your thoughts on single sex versus mixed sex education (all genders together)?- Where do you think sex education should happen? (schools, independent organisations, home, the internet etc?)- Do you believe it should be compulsory (if at school)?
Decision Makers	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What are your thoughts on single sex versus mixed sex education (all genders together)?- Who should be responsible for planning, delivering, and overseeing it?

The questions were designed based on the guidelines provided by Hollis, Openshaw and Goble (2002), who advise that questions should be open-ended, of single-dimension, experience based, and unambiguous.

The student focus group was comprised of eight students of mixed genders, aged 15 to 16, who have been at CIS for at least one year and have experienced sex education lessons at the school. Students came from a variety of cultural backgrounds including Danish, American, Albanian, Slovenian, Thai, British, Moldovan and Belarussian.

The parent focus group was comprised of four parents of secondary school students – three mothers and one father. They also came from diverse cultural backgrounds, namely Spanish, American, Scottish and Irish.

The decision makers focus group was made up of three members of the senior leadership team – School Director, Secondary School Deputy Principal and Curriculum Coordinator and Director of Student Support Services – as well as the school nurse. These members of staff have a direct influence on decisions made around health, curriculum and student support.

The decision to not have a focus group with teachers was intentional and based on the fact that the school does not have any official sex education teachers, as explained in the description of the current state at CIS. Instead, it is a topic that is touched on by many teachers of different subjects in a mix of formal and informal settings, making it very difficult to know who to include.

An interview with a sex education expert was also part of the data collection process. The person interviewed currently works for the Danish sex education organisation *Sex of Samfund* and previously worked at Planned Parenthood, the largest non-profit organisation that delivers reproductive health care and sex education in the United States.

Both the interview and the focus groups were facilitated by me, audio recorded and transcribed by a third person. Samples of the full transcripts can be found in the appendices.

5 DIARY ENTRIES

The following diary entries will explore different aspects that should be considered when thinking about a sex education programme. As explained in section 3, this diary does not follow a linear chronological order, rather, it is organised by topic, and draws on professional practices that have been implemented over the years that I have been teaching sex education at CIS.

The topics covered are: the organisation of sex education; student agency; parental engagement; and pedagogical innovation. Each entry is a compilation of professional practices and experiments, research within the organisation, data collected from focus groups and interviews, as well as existing literature on the subject. These different forms of input contribute to an in-depth reflection around the research question established, leading to a solution-based conclusion where I will propose different actions that CIS may wish to take in order to develop their sex education strategy. These actions can equally be adopted by other organisations that may wish to develop their own sex education programmes.

5.1 Organising Sex Education

5.1.1 Integrated or stand alone?

UNESCO et al. (2018) presents several ways of organising a sex education programme at school. It can be done as a stand alone subject, or integrated into the already existing structure. Both of these strategies have advantages and disadvantages, and may suit some contexts more than others. Having it as a stand alone subject reflects its importance by giving it its own separate status. It also requires fewer teachers to get training for its delivery. However, it is then competing for allocated time with all the other subjects being taught. If using a more integrated approach, a lot more teachers would require training, support and coordination to ensure the all topics are being covered across the different subject areas. But on the other hand, it would lead to a more holistic approach as more perspectives would be included and topics would be addressed through different subjects' lenses.

When discussing the organisation of sex education in the decision-makers focus group, the concept of implicit and explicit sex education arose. Explicit sex education refers to specific lessons or units that are designed to address a certain topic, that is planned and delivered by whoever has been assigned to do so. The director of CIS explained this idea:

I think there has to be some dedicated time, and people who are appropriately trained and have the right approach teaching the explicit sex education. I think about, for example, periods, menstruation, that for me is vital; that every young person has an understanding of that before it happens, either to them or to their friends. (...) Every student should just get a well-designed explicit lesson, lessons or unit or whatever. (Director of CIS)

The implicit curriculum refers to the messages that students receive through the different subjects' curricula and although these are not explicit lessons on particular topics, according to the director of CIS they can, and should, be planned and deliberate.

I think that there are aspects that need to be designed to be implicit in the curriculum. I think that if every piece of literature that a young person reads through their school has a mum and a dad in the family setup, then there's no point in doing a one-off lesson that says 'families can have two dads' or 'families can have two mums'. And then actually the message that's reinforced through the rest of the curriculum is actually, that's abnormal because all literature has every family unit having mum and dad, a boy and a girl, and a dog and a cat. We all know it's just not true. But I think that it needs to be conscious. I think it needs to be deliberate, that implicit design of the curriculum. That it's not just completely left to chance and up to individual teachers. (Director of CIS)

Thinking about sex education as a combination of implicit and explicit curricula may be a way of bridging the two different strategies outlined in UNESCO et al. (2018) together. Maybe a stand alone subject doesn't fit within the school schedule, but perhaps some stand alone units could be incorporated into certain subjects' curricula. At the same time, there may be areas of the existing curriculum where certain topics or ideas could be implicit, but planned. The texts explored in literature class, as well as the different forms of art pose excellent opportunities for some implicit messages around relationships, gender and sexuality for example.

Castillo, Derluyn and Valcke (2017) state that sexuality education should be embedded into all subjects and that therefore all teachers should be able to address certain topics within their lessons. Sexuality should be a transversal axis within the school curriculum rather than an a stand alone topic addressed in isolation. The sex education expert also emphasized this in the interview:

It should be part of every single subject where it makes sense, so that it's constantly put in. (Sex education expert)

One of the tasks that I have been working on within the Physical and Health Education (PHE) department is developing our sexual health education programme by designing explicit units across grades 8, 9 and 10. However, in order to do this I had to investigate whether other subjects, such as science, were perhaps already addressing certain topics so as to avoid repetition. As explained in section 2.4, I created an audit and asked teachers across all subjects and grades of the Middle Years Programme (grades 6 – 10) to collaboratively complete it. From the results, it's clear that many subjects are actually addressing different sexuality education concepts, albeit some more explicitly than others. The PHE department decided to address some of the concepts more explicitly with the older students as it appeared that in grades 9 and 10 they only touched on a couple of concepts implicitly in one or two subjects (see table 2 – p.14). We therefore designed three mini-units of four lessons each – one for grade 9 students and two for grade 10, each addressing a specific concept from the UNESCO et al. (2018) guidance document. Including these explicit units in PHE has allowed students to spend a good amount of time discussing these concepts providing enough depth for meaningful reflection and critical thinking around certain ideas. This is harder to achieve if addressed for example through the advisory programme where the longest block of time allocated is 35 minutes. Equally it means that only the PHE teachers are teaching explicit sex education, rather than all the different advisors, which at CIS accounts for over 20 people. This brings us to the next consideration around organising sex education, which is the teachers' ability to deliver sex education and how that should be factored in to the decision making process.

5.1.2 Who should teach it?

In the student focus group, the importance of who delivers sex education lessons at school was discussed. Students acknowledged how important it was to be taught by someone who knows how to talk about these topics, and by someone students feel comfortable with.

It needs to have the right person with the right education, who knows how to speak up about this topic, because there's a lot of depth to it, and being able to explain to- not children but teenagers, how the body works and what to do and so forth. (Student, 15 years old)

I've had so many conversations with people that were teaching sex ed that were so awkward and so closed off about it. The awkwardness powers over everything. For example, when we had ours it was just so open, you feel like you're able to say whatever. But otherwise, if the teacher isn't comfortable saying it, which some people have said with some other teachers like when they had the sexual education this year, they felt that the teacher was just embarrassed to talk about it and not comfortable, which I feel doesn't create good experiences with sex ed. So I think more important than what class it's in is if the teacher's comfortable to talk about it. (Student, 16 years old)

Students also explained how the general dynamic of the class was important, which may affect the timing of when sex education gets taught during the school year.

With how our school system currently, where every class is a different combination of students, I think it's important to maybe not have it be the very first unit of the year, but maybe a month or two in because then you get used to just your class setting. And then you know. 'Okay, so if we're going to do this in PE class I have these friends in PE class,' or 'I met some new kids in my PE class that I'm actually comfortable talking to,' so then you just get acquainted with everybody pretty well, and so the general classroom dynamic is already more friendly with everybody. (Student, 15 years old)

Lodge et al. (2022) explore the concept of teacher comfortability and factors that affect it. In their research they find quite clearly that “teacher comfortability is a key component in ensuring a positive, dialogic learning environment that is essential for good RSE¹ learning” (p. 7). So much so that it appears teacher comfortability is more likely to determine how positive the student experience is than which school they attend and what type of programme is in place. They found that students within the same school had significantly different experiences depending on who taught it. This is completely aligned with what students at CIS discussed in the focus groups and suggests that investing in helping teachers become more comfortable with sex education is an important strategy in developing a school programme. It therefore makes sense to narrow down the number of teachers who teach sex education so that the school can truly invest in training and supporting that group of people, instead of the entire advisory staff.

Of course the problem with this is knowing who these teachers are. Are they all the PHE teachers? Are they any teacher in the school that feels up for the job? Placing the explicit curriculum in PHE may suggest that the obvious people to teach these units are the PHE teachers. However, this does not necessarily need to be the case. In fact, one of the students mentioned in the focus group that teachers from other subjects could come in to a PHE lesson to deliver a sex education session.

Why not in a PE class but bringing in different teachers like a biology teacher, so they can talk about every aspect without having you being in the class. It's not all of us in biology, or stuff like that. We could have one class where the teachers would come in and talk about their specific field, and then we would know more. (Student, 16 years old)

Equally this presents an opportunity for school counsellors to access students and lead some sessions with them. If teacher comfortability is one of the leading factors in determining the quality of the student experience, it should, in my view, be a priority to design a system that allows teachers who are comfortable and confident with this subject to actually teach it, regardless of which subject they are affiliated to. Placing this responsibility on teachers just because they happen to be an

¹ Relationships and Sexuality Education – the official sex education subject in Ireland

advisor in a certain grade in that particular school year, or a homeroom teacher, seems awfully risky. The director of CIS states this clearly in the focus group:

And I don't think that that should be left to chance, as to whether the home room teacher, for example, is good at explaining that or not.

(Director of CIS)

However, there are topics within sex education that one assumes certain teachers are able to teach within the context of their subject. This may be the case with science. All the conversations around the reproductive system – the anatomy and physiology of the body, could perhaps be totally addressed within the subject of science without any additional training required. This is currently happening at CIS in grade 8, although it appears from the audit that this unit goes far beyond science and extends into many of the other concepts around sexuality education and for that one might argue that specific training is required.

So what is the solution? How should it be organised within the existing school framework? Going back to Castillo, Derluyn and Valcke (2017) and the idea that it should be embedded into every subject, CIS would probably benefit from determining in which subjects the different aspects are covered and whether or not they are covered by the subject teacher and in the subject time. For example, the reproductive system can be covered by science teachers in science as an explicit unit. Or, the concept of human rights and sexuality can be addressed within the subject area of individuals and societies, but as a collapsed day with guest speakers for example. And perhaps in addition to this, the school should invest in training teachers that may already be comfortable with this topic, regardless of the subject they teach, so that these could deliver the explicit sessions around particular topics such as sexual behaviour for example. This type of programme shares out the responsibility but equally allows people to work within their strengths.

Another issue to consider is that if the way forward is to have such an integrated approach with an explicit and implicit curriculum working across multiple subject areas, this requires alignment and coordination. One of the challenges I have experienced at CIS has been accountability. Who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the school has an effective sex education programme? As explained in section 3, CIS does not have a sex education policy, it also does not have a designated person overseeing it. As a PHE teacher, I have taken some responsibility for ensuring that students learn about their sexuality as an important part of their health education, in the same way that we

address physical and mental health for example. However, this only really allows us to work within the framework of our own subject. From the information explored above, it would be beneficial to articulate what we are teaching in health class, with what is being taught in other subjects.

In the decision makers' focus group, when asked the question "whose responsibility within a school is it to ensure sex education is happening effectively?", everyone agreed that there was a shared responsibility among several groups of people – teachers, programme coordinators, curriculum coordinators, directors of student support services, health managers and counsellors. However, by spreading the responsibility across multiple stakeholders, the danger is that people may take a step back with the expectation that somebody else is doing it. It is therefore crucial that somebody is ultimately responsible for ensuring that this shared responsibility is upheld. UNESCO et al. (2018) states that it is the school management team that is responsible for taking the lead in motivating and supporting a sex education programme. Based on this, CIS should be more explicit with determining who it is that is going to drive the sex education programme and ensure that all the different parts at play are effective and coordinated.

An obvious person to do this may be the curriculum coordinator as that is who oversees the curriculum in general. The challenge with this approach is that this person may not necessarily have any training or experience with sexuality education, so it would require some significant professional development. Another person that could take on this role might be the school nurse, but this is someone who may have no pedagogical background, and therefore it may be very difficult to coordinate a programme that happens largely through the curriculum. Appointing someone specifically for this role may also be challenging at CIS due to the constraints of the local agreements signed with the unions as explained in section 2. Perhaps appointing an already existing member of staff and providing some form of compensation could be a viable solution. In the same way that the school has grade level coordinators, a personal project coordinator and subject coordinators, a sex education coordinator could be put in place.

5.1.3 School-based or outsourced?

Another aspect to consider when thinking about the organisation of a sex education programme is whether any of it will be outsourced or not. There are many external organisations that provide this type of service to schools, taking all the pressure off the teachers and ensuring it is being delivered by qualified professionals. This is already happening at CIS in other topics such as alcohol and substance abuse education, where an external group comes in every year for a session with

students and parents. The danger with this approach is that if it is the only way that students are learning about these topics it may not be as effective as intended. As Haberland and Rogow (2015) put it, “CSE² programs do not function in a vacuum” (p. 19). However, there is value in exposing students to input from external sources. In the interview with the sex education expert, she explained this by using abortion as an example:

I would love to have people come from the outside doing a similar thing in sex education, because I think that that makes for a very different kind of attention around the topic. Of course, teachers can't talk about their own abortions. That's not something that we can ask people to do, but we can have conversations on a fairly complex level about abortion if we bring people in from the outside with that kind of experience, for example. (Sex education expert)

If prior to these sessions with external organisations the students have already engaged in units or lessons around that particular topic, they may be more prepared for what they will listen, able to think more critically about what is being said and think about questions they may like to ask beforehand.

5.1.4 Single-sex or all together?

Finally, the issue of whether sex education should be taught in single sex groups or not is important to consider. On this topic, students in the focu group were very clear about wanting to be exposed to the same information everyone else is exposed to, regardless of gender. One student stated:

I think segregation in the realm of sex education is horrible, especially because it's not only about sexual interactions with one another but it's also about finding what gender you're attracted to, who you feel that you are as a person and so forth. And so when you're split up for

² Comprehensive Sexuality Education

example with the guys, and you feel as though you shouldn't be there, or you feel that it's maybe not what you want to talk about mostly, then I think it's better when you know about everything so that you yourself can find where you want to go on that path and which way you want to go. (Student, 15 years old)

This is actually in direct contrast to the research carried out by Strange et al. (2010) where it appears single-sex sex education is preferred, particularly by girls. Pound et al. (2016) also found that girls seem to prefer single-sex sex education, although in this trial boys opted for mixed. Both of these studies were carried out in the United Kingdom so it is possible to question how much the context of the research affects the results. Thinking back to historical development of sex education discussed in the introduction, the United Kingdom has often taken more conservative approaches, and in fact, the Department for Education explicitly suggests that certain areas of education can be approached through single-sex groups, such as sex education and sport (Department for Education, 2018).

This particular topic was also explored in the interview with the sex education expert and her views recognised that perhaps this isn't as straight forward as those making this decision might hope.

I think if you don't have a complex attitude towards this then you are not looking at the community you're dealing with. So there is no blanket statement that this is good or bad. In principle we should be able to talk about everything in front of everyone, and the idea of binary genders, of course, is another issue that we should try to integrate into that. Who are we actually separating, and why and how? I think there can be situations where it makes a lot of sense to separate a group with special concerns or needs. Are they girls and women in the making? I don't know if that's entirely a good place to start. (Sex education expert)

So perhaps instead of thinking about separate groups based on the sex or gender that students present, schools can think of other criteria that may make more sense to group students by. This alludes to the concept of affinity groups where members of a shared identity participate in activities,

and forums focused on their identity. This practice can be a powerful tool for identity development, mental health maintenance, and social justice promotion (Columbia Social Work Review, 2020), all aspects that relate to some degree to sexuality education.

5.2 Student agency

Student agency has been at the heart of my work designing and delivering sex education lessons. It can be defined as the creation of mechanisms by which students are included in the process of analysing teaching and learning in order to inform classroom practice (Cook-Sather, 2020). With this in mind, I have been very intentional in the way I have reached out to students for their input on several aspects of the programme, including content and pedagogy. Some of those strategies have included informal but intentional conversations with small groups of students, formal input and feedback forms at the beginning and end of units, activities in class and the inclusion of students in the creation of resources and teaching material. These strategies have not only helped me make decisions about how and what to teach, but also strengthened my relationship with the students. Martin and Collie (2019) explain how a strong and positive relationship between teachers and students can impact students' academic development; it is therefore an aspect that should be nurtured and focused on intentionally.

One example of how I've used student agency to inform my practice happened in March 2022 from an event organized by the student-led Gender and Sexuality Alliance club (GSA). This was an evening event for parents to discuss how families can be supportive and inclusive of LGBTQ+ youth. I was invited to be on the panel for this event and it was attended by some members of staff, parents and students. At the end of the event one of the students that attended came to speak to me and asked if she and I could meet to discuss the content of sex education at CIS. She said she would like to participate in designing the curriculum and had some ideas that she would like to share with me. We set up a meeting and I invited her to share her thoughts. This student wanted the curriculum to address more explicitly the intersection between neurodiversity and sexuality and she had collated a sum of research which she shared with me. According to Cook-Sather (2020), one of the characteristics of student agency is "the recognition of students as those with essential perspectives on learning and the creation of conditions under which the power and responsibility for educational practice and research are shared" (p. 4). This moment with this student fully represented this idea of sharing power and responsibility, and as a result I was able to design a lesson that explicitly addressed neurodiversity and sexuality using student voice as the driving force

behind it. Rather than interpreting this event as one that undermined my ability to make decisions around content, I used my expertise to transform student voice into teaching material, without having to do all the research in isolation. Feeling undermined by students is something that teachers often struggle with (Mandouit, 2018) but my experience suggests that it is an extremely valuable exchange that in no way criticized my own abilities. It is also important to note that this conversation with the student only arose because we were at a specific event that was student led and promoted student voice. It is therefore crucial to foster an environment where students feel they have opportunities to bring forward new ideas and to reach out to teachers in a comfortable setting.

Another example of how to use student agency is the inclusion of students in the creation of the teaching resources and materials. During the school year 2020-2021, I created some lessons around two topics that were highly relevant at the time (and still are) as they responded to current events that were impacting students' wellbeing: racism and LGBTQ+ issues. For both of these topics, I invited students to collaborate in the creation of two podcast episodes where we discussed these issues. For the episode about racism, I collaborated with the student-led club RSJU – Racial and Social Justice Union – and I moderated a panel discussion where students shared their experiences, ideas and frustrations with the intention of helping other students in the secondary school understand complex concepts such as systemic racism for example. I was then able to design a lesson where students listened to this podcast, discussed what they heard and asked questions directly to those who participated.

For the LGBTQ+ issues I collaborated with the GSA – Gender and Sexuality Alliance – and created a podcast that helped students navigate terminology, history and current events by listening and learning from their peers. I was then able to create some interactive games and quizzes where students had to use the knowledge gained from their peers in the podcast to answer a series of questions.

In both of these cases I was able to share the responsibility of teaching and learning with the students whose experiences were far more valuable as a teaching material than any content that I could have created myself.

Inviting students to participate and be active in all stages of the learning experience has been a truly valuable approach, and one that is in line with the concept of participatory design (Könings et al., 2007). If we think about our work at school as a service to the students - our users - we can apply some principles of participatory, or human centred-design to solve some of the problems in the field of education. Könings et al. (2007) state that there is often a gap between the perception of

teachers and the perception of students and that participatory design can bridge that gap. So, implementing some of the concepts used in this type of design could be an extremely powerful strategy, particularly when thinking about sex education given the generational differences between teachers and students.

With this in mind, the idea of empathizing with the students becomes highly relevant, and setting up conversations that allow the teacher to listen, empathise and gain a deeper understanding of the students' needs is vital to the process of designing a programme that actually responds to their needs. It was also based on this premise that I conducted the focus group with students.

Although this focus groups had the primary goal of collecting data to inform this thesis from a research perspective, it also served a professional purpose of empathizing with the students of Copenhagen International School in order to design better learning experiences in my work. It was as an excellent opportunity for me as a teacher to listen to the voices of students in a dedicated and relaxed environment, providing me with invaluable insights into the student experience. Additionally, it strengthened my relationship with the students who participated. Mandouit (2018) discusses how using student feedback can increase the rapport between students and teachers, even though many teachers feel it undermines their authority.

5.3 Pedagogical innovation

Experimenting with different pedagogical strategies has been one of my steepest growth curves as an educator. If I think back to how I was taught how to teach, many strategies were based on research conducted decades ago in a time where technology was at a completely different stage. Today, I find myself teaching students who have instant access to almost all the information in the world at their fingertips due to smartphones and other devices. This has revolutionised the way I teach in general, but when it comes to sex education it has alerted me to the fact that students don't need lectures about all the different diseases they may catch, or heavily content-based lessons. What they do need is to develop a number of skills that will help them find information, navigate that information, and critically assess its meaning in order to make decisions. They need to develop sexual literacy and assertive communication skills in order to interact safely and respectfully with other people. This type of skill set requires a totally different approach to teaching than the one I was taught in my teaching training ten years ago. Some teachers trained thirty or forty years ago; the gap for them will be even bigger. Haberland and Rogow (2015) support the need for innovation in the way we teach sex education and argue that this will require "more than

one-shot preservice training and in-service workshops. Rather, it has bold implications for pedagogy more broadly and thus for education reform” (p. 19).

Based on this idea of pedagogical innovation, and partly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, I designed and implemented my own teaching methodology, which included the creation of podcasts and small trust-based group discussions. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, my school resorted to remote learning, as did a huge number of schools and other educational institutions worldwide. This meant that suddenly, all of our lessons had to be taught online, including Physical and Health Education. My initial reaction to this was to feel very sceptical about delivering the sex education units without having students in the room, face to face. I was worried that I wouldn't be able to control the class as easily, or that students would feel very uncomfortable learning about these issues through their screens. However, I decided to try and make it work, and because I didn't want to contribute to the huge amount of screen time that young people were already being exposed to with other subjects, I decided to use podcasting as my main strategy, allowing them to get off their screens and move while listening to the material.

In terms of the content and style of the podcast, I wanted to move away from a highly informational approach because students can find information easily themselves if guided in the right direction. Instead, I wanted students to enjoy listening to the podcasts, laugh a little, talk about it with their friends and use them as a starting point for fruitful discussions about sexuality. Therefore, the podcasts used very informal language, humorous scenarios and even sarcasm to allow students to truly really engage with the topics addressed. This type of approach has been validated by Kolenz and Branfman (2018) who wrote about a pedagogical style called feminist pedagogy of laughter where educators use humour to create a more joyful and participatory experience. Their findings suggest that this “feminist pedagogy of laughter can enhance sex education programmes, improve participants' physical and emotional wellbeing, and reduce sexist, racist and heterosexist myths” (p. 578). My experience with using humour in sex education is in complete alignment with this research.

Attached to each podcast episode was a set of exploration questions that students could then discuss with their friends in small groups. These questions were related to the topic of that particular episode and aimed to get students sharing their opinions on the subject, discussing scenarios about the subject and reflecting on any issues that may exist surrounding that subject. It also included some factual questions where students had to practise finding information and assessing its reliability.

The groups were formed based on already existing friendships, ensuring all members of the groups felt comfortable discussing sexuality related issues and trusted that their opinions and questions would be received and responded to respectfully. Because students were at home, the discussions were carried out online, using digital platforms to meet and also enabling the possibility of recording discussions.

The feedback received from students was overwhelmingly positive. Here are some examples of student feedback:

“Thank you for making a comfortable environment for your students to discuss this topic. I think it's a very important thing to discuss, and I really enjoyed the way you communicated the information through the podcast. It was also really nice exploring the different areas or aspects of sex and how it affects young adolescents (like mental health).”

“I think it has been a great learning experience, it's been very educating and interesting. Even though this unit was made for remote learning I think it is something you should do for next year. You learn a lot more about the serious things involved in relationships and sex rather than what we learned in sex ed a few years ago. That practically only included puberty and what happens to our bodies but nothing about what we have discussed in the podcasts and they are all obviously important topics that everyone needs to know about. Great job for this unit!”

“I really enjoyed this unit and loved listening to the podcasts!”

“It was pretty amazing I have to say :)”

“Even though these topics could be awkward it was actually fun with the podcasts and the use of humour in some instances.”

Based on this feedback, it is clear that students appreciated listening to the podcasts, that they enjoyed the humorous approach and felt comfortable learning about sexuality. Since returning to face to face learning, I have attempted to recreate this unit in the classroom, and have actually found it to be less successful, partly because students are no longer listening to these podcasts in the privacy of their own bedrooms, but also because discussing awkward topics through a screen seems to benefit them due to their ease around digital communication. According to Deep (2015) teenagers see the internet as the main platform to communicate with one another, and according to Davila et al. (2017), the fact that teenagers' main form of communication is through a screen can lead to difficulties with interpersonal skills. This seems to be the case when attempting to get students to engage in face to face discussions about sexuality. The question that arises is therefore: which way do we go? Do we accept that young people are more comfortable in online settings and deliver sex education through online methods? Or, do we try and redirect them back to in-person methods with the hope that it will be more beneficial to their interpersonal skills in the long run even if it means having a less comfortable or enjoyable sex education experience at school? Perhaps a blended approach could bring out the best of both methods. Perhaps some parts of sex education are taught more effectively online and others face to face.

When exploring current research about online sex education, one interesting trend that is worth exploring is gamification. Haruna et al. (2018) explored game-based learning (GLB) and found that "students perceived that GBL and gamification are pedagogies that are easy and friendly ways to enhance sexual health knowledge. According to the students, the sexual health knowledge acquired from the game-based learning methods was very important for their current and future life" (p. 16). Unfortunately, I have not had the opportunity to experiment with GBL at my current school when teaching sex education. However, I recognise the potential that it holds as a replacement for traditional teaching methods when it comes to content exploration and knowledge acquisition, and will certainly implement it in my future practice.

Several studies have explored the concept of GBL within the field of sexual health and found that the impact on learning is extremely positive. In Hong Kong a game called *Make Smart Choices* was developed to help teenagers gain knowledge around safer sex practices. The conclusions showed that this game had a positive influence on students' knowledge and helped fill a gap that exists in many Asian societies due to sex being such a taboo subject (Chu et al., 2015). Arnab et al. (2013) report the benefits of including GBL in relationships and sex education as part of a blended learning model where students play the game but also have classroom delivery where they can discuss and

debrief the game play. It is also highlighted in this study how important it is to include teachers and pupils throughout the development and evaluation processes in order to ensure the game receives a positive level of acceptance. This aligns with the diary entry on student agency and with the idea of using participatory design methods when creating innovative educational strategies.

In order to be able to implement pedagogical strategies that go beyond the traditional ones, it is imperative to upskill teachers. It is an unfair expectation that teachers should be able to work in ways that are completely different to the ones they've been taught with no training. Schools need to take the lead and push for better and more impactful professional development interventions that will truly bring about change. Haberland and Rogow (2015) highlight this need to strengthen teacher skill as an urgent priority for scaling up or improving sex education. They believe that in order for young people to be able to apply what they learn in their real lives, sex education needs to use diverse and interactive pedagogical methods, involving not only cognitive learning but also personal reflection as well as critical thinking. However, currently most education systems are poorly equipped to nurture these skills, making it very difficult to address it from an individual teacher standpoint.

5.4 Parental engagement

In both the interview with a sex education expert and the conversation with decision makers, parents were identified as a potential barrier to effective sex education in schools; the main reason being their own lack of sex education and therefore lack of confidence and skill in addressing these topics with their children.

If parents are not comfortable talking about it, kids haven't had these conversations. And if they haven't had these conversations then it's difficult in class. If it's difficult in class then they retract. And then the parents don't follow up and it's like a cycle that perpetuates itself. (Sex education expert)

This idea is corroborated by Waliyanti and Dewantari (2021) who found that "most parents in Indonesia still feel clumsy while talking about reproductive health and sexuality issues to their children who are starting to grow into adolescents" (p. 95).

Likewise, Kuštreba, Elezović and Štulhofer (2015) found that generational differences lie at the base of this discomfort as “younger generations [are] more sexually permissive than older generations and, thus, more likely to have positive attitudes toward SE” (p. 331). Thinking back to the historical context of sex education and acknowledging that a lot of parents will have grown up during the twentieth century, this is not surprising.

However, in the focus group with parents themselves, this idea was actually refuted on the grounds that even parents who had no sex education at all, or had highly conservative sex education, are in fact capable of talking to their children in an honest and open way about sexuality. All four parents that participated in the conversation reported this being the case with them and when asked if they thought their own sex education (or lack thereof) impacted their ability to talk to their children about sex, they all answered no, sharing a desire to do things differently to the way they were done in the past.

Not really in my case. I was able to speak quite openly to the boys. I think deliberately. I'm not going to do it the way it was done. (Mother of two boys – 13 and 17 years old)

Nevertheless, they did acknowledge that their children were more sexually literate than they were and that although they were open and happy to have these conversations, they felt they lagged behind in both knowledge and vocabulary.

“I think it is a generation thing. I also think there is a certain degree of fluency. I find that because I'm not a native English speaker, when I talk to my kids, because they are, they can obviously tell that I'm not a native speaker, and I think with this it's almost the same thing. Despite wanting to be open, willing to share information, willing to tell everything that I know and I can help with, and yet I've learned this as a grown-up, in a way. So I lack a fluency that they have. So it's the same thing.” (Father of two boys – 11 and 17 years old)

As a teacher of sex education at CIS, I have come across these issues several times and some parents do in fact find it truly difficult to discuss sex education topics with their children. It isn't the case for all parents, but it certainly is for some. There are plenty of sex positive households in the

CIS community that embrace open conversations around sexuality and value their children having access to information. On the other hand, we also have students who report never having had a single conversation with their parents about sex, or even puberty. Empowering parents and families to talk about sexuality in their household is, an extremely important part of a school's sex education strategy or programme. UNESCO et al. (2018) corroborate this idea stating that "the cooperation and support of parents, families, and other community actors needs to be sought from the outset and regularly reinforced" (p. 88).

"Learning to build community" is part of CIS' manifesto, which in the context of sex education emphasises how important it is to acknowledge and respond to the community's needs. If the parent community struggles to navigate sexuality education then the school must find ways to address this in order to maximise student learning. But when operating in such a culturally diverse environment, it is difficult to know what the best approach is. If the school errs on the side of caution, the more liberal and progressive families may feel their needs are not being met, but if the school launches itself into a post-modern, thought-provoking strategy, the more conservative families may feel unheard and misrepresented. So how can we balance respecting parents' wishes, cultures and religions with upholding every young person's right to reliable, evidence-based information about their sexual development?

I have experimented with three strategies to try and tackle this issue and I believe they have the potential to help schools manage these situations effectively:

- Parent events that specifically address the learning that their children are experiencing in class;
- Supporting parents in teaching the school's curriculum at home when requested;
- Transparency: Inviting parents to engage in open conversations about the school's approach to sex education.

5.4.1 Parent events

At the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year, some of the teachers that teach grade 9 designed an interdisciplinary unit between Physical and Health Education and Individuals & Societies, where students learnt about gender. This unit had the potential for being quite controversial because we addressed issues around gender equality, gender identity and gender stereotypes. We also recognised that it is a topic that many parents may find difficult to navigate because there are

certain conversations around gender identity that were certainly not out in the open when the current generation of parents were growing up, and therefore they may not necessarily understand them when their children bring them up at the dinner table at home. So, in order to bridge that gap, we hosted a parent event where we invited parents to a cheese & wine informal social evening, during which we gave them conversation prompts, short presentations, and resources to use at home. We explained to them how we teach about these issues and set up activities that were very similar to the activities the students were doing in class. By doing this, some of the questions that parents might have had about why and how we teach these topics got answered, and they had an opportunity to experience first-hand their children's teachers in action. This type of event helped us build trust and strengthened the relationship between the school and the families it serves. In assess the success of the event, we sent out an anonymous Padlet to all participants asking for feedback. Below are excerpts from three different parents:

“Absolutely brilliant concept and input. Good to connect with parents, understand deeply what our kids are getting exposed to and learning and broadening our own perspective.”

“Great that CIS is focusing on this and that it is such an integral part of the classes”

“Overall very good. I have not heard many schools address this proactively. So very well done!”

One of the words that stood out to me in the feedback was 'proactive', and I believe this is one of the reasons this type of strategy works. When we as a school take initiative, bring up the topic and initiate the discussion ourselves, rather than responding to issues if and when they arise, we gain full control of the narrative around how we as an institution teach about these topics; in this specific case - gender. This strengthens the school's curriculum and gives parents confidence in us by showing that we are on top of these issues, confident in how we address them and transparent about what we do in the classroom with their children.

5.4.2 Supporting home-teaching

Another strategy that we have adopted in the Physical and Health Education department is supporting parents when they do not want their children to participate in sex education classes at school. Often the reasons for this are grounded in religion and parents want to have control over the way students learn about sexuality. In this situation there is a very important question to navigate: how do we respect families' wishes whilst upholding every young person's right to scientifically accurate information and high-quality education?

The way in which we have managed this situation over the last two years has actually worked very well and the feedback from parents has been positive. Instead of approaching this from an opt in or opt out perspective, we have created a system where there is some flexibility but also accountability. If parents do not wish their child to participate in the sex education classes, then we ask that they deliver our curriculum at home. However, we do not leave them to do it completely independently; instead, we provide them with the resources and lesson activities that the student would have explored in class and expect them to engage in the same assessment tasks as their peers. We also check up on the learning by contacting the parents directly and asking them how it is going. If a parent does not agree to this strategy and wishes for their child not to have any sex education at all then it becomes more complex. This would then become a decision that the leadership team of the school would need to make. Can families opt out of parts of our curriculum when they do not match their values or expectations? Would this be permitted in other areas of the curriculum? A sex education policy would make this situation a lot easier to navigate and although during my six years at CIS we have not needed to go down this route, I believe it would help lay out clear expectations around sex education to incoming parents, removing the need for these conversations further down the line.

5.4.3 Transparency and input

One of the things that surprised me the most during the focus group sessions was the answers from parents about whether they believed they should be informed or even invited to take part in the development of the school's sex education curriculum. My assumption was that by inviting parents into the conversation at the design stage of the programme, they would feel heard, respected and their confidence in the programme would increase. This assumption was actually

inspired by research around participatory design, a method that is particularly popular in Scandinavia (Gleason & von Gillern, 2018).

Instead, according to the parent focus group, parents don't feel the need to be informed of the content of the sex education programme, let alone be invited to participate in its design. They trust the school they choose to send their children to and they don't demand such things from other subjects either.

“I don't think there's a problem getting feedback from parents, information from parents about what they feel comfortable with, but they should not be in the driving seat” (Mother of two girls – 15 and 18 years old)

However, I have experienced some different parental views. On more than one occasion, parents have explicitly requested detailed information about sex education lessons, what is covered and how.

Last year, when planning how to improve the sex education curriculum, I invited a group of parents to a meeting to listen to their expectations and concerns and I would argue that this was an extremely beneficial meeting both for the school and the parents that attended. The opportunity to listen to parents is extremely valuable as it helps the school empathise with its community and therefore respond better to its needs. It also opens up an honest dialogue supporting a transparent approach to the curriculum design which can reassure parents that there is no hidden agenda when making certain choices. It is also an opportunity for the school to share with the parents some of the difficulties around decision-making in sex education. One of the most powerful aspects of this meeting was witnessing the parents discuss with each other their differences, their backgrounds and their expectations and seeing them realise how different they all are. This allowed me to highlight the difficulty in addressing such a diverse group's needs in a way that they could comprehend and also empathise with.

6 CONCLUSION AND REFLECTION

Delivering high quality sex education is no easy task. Schools are up against numerous challenges on multiple levels – cultural, political, organisational, interpersonal. As an individual organisation, there is little a school can do to bring about immediate change in the cultural and political spheres. However, it does have some control over the organisational and interpersonal barriers.

One of the most significant challenges to sex education is teachers' ability to deliver sex education. No matter how a school decides to organise its programme, ensuring that whoever is teaching it has the adequate competencies is vital to its success. As explored in the diary entries, teacher comfortability is one of the leading factors impacting the student experience. If a teacher is comfortable and confident teaching this subject, students are more likely to actually learn (O'Brien, Hendriks & Burns, 2021). The solution seems rather simple then: train the teachers. However, even if schools were to allocate the necessary resources to achieve this, when exploring the existing opportunities for training, these vary significantly (Federal Centre for Health Education et al., 2017). They don't necessarily provide enough opportunity for practice, leading to continued discomfort when attempting to teach this subject. Focusing only on knowledge acquisition and excluding critical thinking and self-reflection exercises does not meet the competencies required for a sexuality educator (Federal Centre for Health Education et al., 2017). Gaining the knowledge is the easy part, particularly with widespread internet access; knowing how to remove judgement and bias from the delivery is the real challenge. Answering factual questions about human reproduction is actually a fairly simple task and one that students nowadays can do independently with their devices; discussing consent, harassment and sexual abuse requires a totally different skillset.

In order to overcome the challenges at the teacher level, there need to be opportunities for teachers to develop the appropriate competencies – ones that go beyond knowledge acquisition. But if the training on offer is inadequate, then we are stuck with the same problem. This is something that goes beyond the school's responsibility, and perhaps an aspect that external organisations could reflect on, including higher education institutions and teacher training schools.

This also applies to teachers' abilities to work with innovative pedagogy. If teachers are still employing methods that were developed in a non-digital world, how can we even begin to talk about gamification and blended learning models? How have teacher training courses responded to this need for different approaches to teaching and learning, not only within the field of sex education, but education in general?

As explained throughout this thesis, Copenhagen International School (CIS) has not yet taken this important step in ensuring that teachers who teach about sexuality are adequately trained. Taking this step would have a positive impact on student learning, whilst also helping teachers feel more confident about delivering sex education, thus reducing potential teacher resistance to being involved in the first place. The school does not need to provide external training to every single teacher; it can be strategic in its approach. Referring back to the diary entry where I discussed who should teach it and who could coordinate the programme, whoever this coordinator is could also be responsible for internal professional development and training. This reduces the cost, and also provides ongoing support on the job from someone who is familiar with the environment. Of course this would be a long term project, but training one staff member might be a good place to start.

Another step that CIS could take is to formally attribute responsibility for specific areas of sex education to different subject groups. As was seen in the results from the audit carried out, this is actually already happening to a certain degree. The problem is that it is not formalised or articulated, so as soon as there is teacher turnover, there's no guarantee that the programme will continue. Change isn't necessarily a bad thing though, in fact it is necessary. But change needs to reflect the ongoing needs of the students and the school, and must be in line with whatever framework is in place. The UNESCO et al. (2018) framework is a good place to start. CIS can adopt it as its formal guiding document and assign different key concepts to different subject groups – appendix 5 provides an example of how this could be done. The teachers in these subjects can then do the required adjustments to their curricula to ensure that everything is being covered. Although this may sound like a significant request from teachers, based on the audit results, the school is actually already half way there.

One aspect that this thesis has not explored in great detail is the content of sex education – what should actually be included in the programme, at what age students should be exposed to different content and the boundaries of what can or cannot be discussed. Different national curricula have proposed frameworks for this and I have frequently referred to the UNESCO et al. (2018) guidance document. It would be interesting to learn more about how the topics outlined in these documents are actually being delivered in the classroom. For example, we know that we must teach about consent, but what does that actually mean? What are teachers telling students about this? The school may have adopted a formal framework to work with, but if the content is not being appropriately delivered then this too will impact student learning. This leads back to the issue of teacher training and the importance of helping teachers navigate the delivery of difficult conceptual topics.

As for my own learning journey, this thesis has highlighted the importance of evidence-based decision making. There is so much research being developed in this field, and so much evidence about what works and what doesn't, it makes very little sense to use arbitrary opinion to decide on the path forwards. Equally it has allowed me to review my work as a sex educator and a teacher in general, and given me confidence to continue experimenting with innovative solutions, for example my podcast series. Having said that, I have also learnt that research can actually be quite unhelpful if taken out of context. For example, when deciding whether sex education should be delivered in single-sex groups or not, there is research that clearly suggests that girls benefit from single-sex lessons (Pound et al., 2016; Strange et al., 2010). However when talking to the girls at Copenhagen International School, lots of them say the exact opposite. This is when the principles of human-centred design become relevant. We must understand the community that we serve, and our decisions must respond to their needs which are inevitably tied to their reality – their cultural context.

Finally, in answer to the research question - how can schools adequately respond to the current and evolving needs of young people regarding their sexuality education? – schools must ensure they have teachers who are confident, comfortable and capable of delivering sex education, through training and support; schools must work with a formal framework that is written and aligned; schools must upskill their teachers to ensure that the pedagogical tools being used respond to the learning needs of their students and make sense for the content of sex education; student agency should be at centre of the programme, and parents should be kept close, be informed and supported, so that they too can educate their children towards a positive and inclusive view of sexuality.

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8 APPENDICES

Appendix 1 – Sample of student focus group transcript

- S7: *I also agree. It's extremely important, but also it's important, as you guys all said, to do it in the right way because a lot of the subjects, it's not just about sex, but also so many concepts underneath that idea are extremely stigmatised. So you can have sex education where they only talk about sex between a man and a woman. They don't go through different ways that it could be done and it's almost like they do the bare minimum, just scratching the surface of what it is. But it's not just about sex. It's also about the sexual nature of growing up, I think. It changes a lot and I think that kind of stuff is stigmatised a lot in sex education. Normalising things is pretty important.*
- C: *What's your experience with sex education? And you can refer to sex education you've had here in CIS or in previous schools, you can talk about good or bad. Martin, you gave a positive example before when you were talking about my lesson. And feel free to say that even in my lessons it wasn't ideal. This is a learning curve for everyone, myself included.*
- S7: *I have to be honest. I didn't learn sex education until I came to CIS. I came in sixth grade and before that, literally nothing. Not once ounce of information was given to me about it. Luckily my parents are very open about that kind of stuff and they talked to me about it, which is very important, but I understand that not every kid has that, which is why sex education is so important especially from a younger age. You don't have to throw all this information on a 12-year-old kid. I get that, but having this understanding so that when you get older it's not this weird thing, this alienated thing that you don't really understand.*
- S2: *As well, when I came to CIS it was also the first year when I had sex ed. Before, especially in my home country, no-one ever talks about it. If someone would hear you talk about it they would be like 'what are you saying?'*
- C: *Is it Slovenia?*
- S2: *Yeah. And then one thing I would like more when it comes to sexual education is that it would be longer, in a way. Because for now, I've only always had like, four lessons, sometimes eight. Sometimes it would be repeating, which I do think is really important and everything but I think it would be important to sometimes just have even longer periods of teaching sex ed, because some people are absent and they don't hear them. I don't know. I just feel like sexual education is so important especially in these years that we are in right now. And to be aware of it, and that it's okay to talk about it, and that it shouldn't be something you should be ashamed of.*
- S5: *At my previous school – I went to an American school before this – and I think that really influenced the way that any subject was taught, really. But we started learning about sex ed in middle school, which was fifth grade. And I remember in fifth grade and in sixth grade they would always separate us, and it would always be this big thing. They'd be like 'Okay, today's the special advisory lessons. So all the girls go here, with all the female teachers, and then all the guys go in a different classroom with all the male teachers.' And then we just sat there, like 50 people in a cramped classroom, and three poor teachers trying to explain what was going on. I think it was kind of harmful, the way that they did that, because then when we walked out of the classroom it was just a lot of awkward glances between each other, like 'what did you learn? What did they tell you in there?' But then it was also very separated because then none of the students would actually talk to each other about what happened. And so they only taught us what they thought we needed to know, and maybe not everything that we needed to know, and it wasn't taught by actual PE teachers or health professionals. It was just the English teacher that was a woman that told us stuff.*
- S1: *Adding on to your point, I feel like it's very important that you are taught in a professional manner. Because even if you don't have sex at all, or very limited, you can learn so much rubbish from friends and from jokes and from the internet. Then it's better to have a good proper education, not only for your*

gender but also for other genders and everything. I feel like that's super important. I guess that also relates back to the previous question, how important it is. But specifically, it's really important to be taught in a professional manner because then you have a good basic knowledge of what it is.

S5: Also, if you're taught just everybody together by professional health teachers or by your PE teacher, then it also normalises everything because then you all obtain the same information and it's not this weird awkward subject that has to be secretive and separate, but it's just general information that everybody goes through at some point in their life. And so it really normalises talking about the subject in an open way. So I think the way that they did it, for me personally in fifth grade, it was very weird, now that I say it.

Appendix 2 – Sample of decision makers group transcript

- C: *And is this teachers?*
- S2: *Teachers. I think teachers maybe, to some extent, is a way bigger barrier than the parents because parents to some degree- I have so many emails parents have written me saying 'Thank you for doing this. I did not know how to start it, and by you doing this my kid came home and asked me funny questions that you had asked them to go home and ask me. And I had (inaudible) barriers to begin with but now my kid has so much more knowledge than me.' I even had an Indian kid that brought her mum up, because mum did not know why she had periods. She just knew she had them once a month and it was important to have them, and when you don't have them you are pregnant, full stop. So I gave mum a whole hour lesson on periods. So I don't think parents necessarily is the biggest. They are fearing that we will not teach abstinence because that's so important for some, and as soon as you promise them that will be a part of it, where there's a second or two, then they put down the weapons and they are actually, I think, relieved that you're covering that because they don't know how to address it.*
- S1: *I think parents are a big barrier. In my previous experience before I came to CIS we had to get permission to do trainings and sexual education, and we had a lot of parents that would not give consent. And those were the kids that we really needed to get to. So I think you're dealing with a lot of cultural, religious and political impact that can have on public schools. This is in the United States.*
- C: *So this was in the United States? So in this particular example when you had to ask a parent to consent to deliver this, how much information were you giving the parents that they were consenting to? Did they have access to the full programme? They did. So they had full access to the content that was going to be delivered and then they either said yes or no. Any other thoughts about barriers? We've mentioned teachers, we've mentioned parents, as two significant barriers, teachers being huge barriers in your opinion.*
- S2: *The kids themselves can be a barrier because depending on their developmental age, whether they are learning support or (general?) kids, and you will see some that sit like this, and they won't listen, but then after a little while, maybe a week or a month or a year they become more curious and used to it and will start listening. But in the beginning they might be afraid that this is going to be gross or whatever word they'll put on. Or awkward.*
- S4: *I mean, what you're talking about is discomfort, right? There's a lack of comfort, there's a lack of confidence in addressing topics of sex education in the students themselves and very much in the teachers. They don't feel equipped to confidently deliver content. Whether they've got good resources or not is another barrier, potentially. And they don't necessarily feel like they're an expert. And I think a lot of our teachers, and maybe teachers around the world, like to be experts. They like to feel like they have the expertise and they're talking about something that they feel very confident that they know a lot about. And I think there are a lot of teachers who have a level of discomfort in addressing this as a topic. When they are delivering to students they don't want to get it wrong, they don't know that they have the expertise to deal with all questions, they don't necessarily feel comfortable in their own toolkit. And I think to some degree another barrier for teachers is this concern about being perceived badly by students and/or parents. Now what do I mean by that? I think we hear horror stories of adults abusing their position of trust, and having a sexual interest in children, and of course that's a tiny minority of professionals that work with children, but I think in part of our teacher training we're given advice about not putting oneself in a vulnerable position, and I think that some teachers get concerned that they are putting themselves in a vulnerable position when they are talking about sex education. And I think that that's another barrier to having a wide number of people teaching sex education; which leads me to another barrier which is time. How do you carve out- I look at Katie as I say this because she said one about explicit time, right? Wellness or whatever. How do you carve out explicit concrete dedicated time for sex education, wellness education etc? And if you do carve out that dedicated time, who is it that you need to be in that time? Do you have enough people that can be in that time that are the appropriate adults to be addressing these topics, that feel confident?*
- S2: *I totally agree on the time thing because you hear that a lot, actually.*

S3: *It's the perennial chestnut in teaching, isn't it? Time, for sure. Your point you made about teachers not being comfortable about it. For myself, when I've been in classrooms with girls particularly, or I've had small group conversations with girls, I always get this paranoia that do they feel that because I'm lesbian I'm trying to convince them to the other side? No, truly.*

C: *I hear you.*

S3: *It's a real anxiety sometimes. And even when I'm in the classroom with students, I'm keeping the door open because I'm so paranoid that they are going to go and complain and say, 'Jen tried to turn me into a lesbian,' or 'she's trying to promote homosexuality', and I know other teachers feel the same way. I can speak for Karen. She's worried about that too. And it's always in the back of my mind. We try to be role models in a very different way. We're just human, we're just like everybody else. We're just living our best life, right? But when it comes to having conversations with kids about sexuality I'm super cautious about doing that in small groups or if it becomes 'I want to talk to you about this.' If it comes from the kids that's different. I don't know. It's really hard to articulate but I was really struck when you said that because it's so true. And then there always is that worry about are they going to complain or will they go home and say they were trying to convert people. So it's always been in the back of our mind. Much less now that the conversation is growing but certainly earlier. But it's always something that we - I'll speak for myself, not for Karen - I've always been very conscious of. And that leads to that second question you asked, Catarina, about whether or not conversations should be had in binary groups. I used to think yes but now I think no. I think that's grown with how long I've been in education, my own journey of teaching, but also the way that gender is talked about now in society. It's very much part of diversity, inclusion, equity and justice, right? And so because that conversation is changing globally, so too is the way that we're teaching it to our kids. And when you were talking earlier, Carolina, about teaching periods, and you were too Melvin. I thought yeah, everyone needs to know about it so of course we have everyone together. When I was growing up it was always 'Girls, let's have this conversation,' and the boys were left out of it. So now it's more that everyone should know it. I was just in a grade eight science class and they were talking about it together, and the conversation was so open and so clear and so matter-of-fact, and that was really refreshing. So I think that everyone together should hear the same message because if people are hearing different messages then it becomes confusing and conflicting. So all in.*

Appendix 3 – Sample of parent focus group transcript

- S1: *I agree with what you said, calling body parts by the correct names, and making them like “This is an elbow, that’s a penis.” That’s as much importance as you should give at that age. Don’t wave it around in public like your elbow.*
- S2: *Ideally I would like to see a rolling educational curriculum. So from pre-kindergarten they’re getting age-appropriate lessons about body and touching and consent, all the way through, and then you build on those. Like IB Sex Ed.*
- S1: *And before they hit the puberty years where the hormones are going to kick in and all that, they should know a fair amount even before that. Even though they’re like ‘This is boring, boys have cooties,’ type of thing, I think it’s very important to know this is coming and it’s not scary, and it’s factual. And I think once they get older you get more into the teenage embarrassment years and I think that has to be dealt with as well.*
- C: *Fernando, what do you think?*
- S4: *I agree. It probably is not the best comparison because it might have all sorts of implications, but I came from a country for instance in which drinking alcohol is part of the culture in a way that is not in other countries-*
- S2: *Me too.*
- S4: *-and the approach in other countries is like ‘No no no,’ until you have a certain age, and then just go and do whatever you want, right? And in my context it’s like ‘It’s okay. Your kid wants to try the wine, just have a sip of wine,’ and it becomes a natural thing of daily life, that there are certain drinks that have alcohol and you just learn to deal with them, and it becomes a natural learning process. And I think that’s the way I would think sex education should be. It’s not something strange or something that has to start at a certain age because that’s only then when you’re ready to understand things and to deal with things. I think as you say, it should be from the very beginning and adjusting to the evolution of the different kids as they grow.*
- S1: *I can’t disagree with that. I think it’s a very, very sensible approach.*
- C: *Tanya?*
- S3: *Yeah, and I think because they’re younger, or even actually possibly as they get older, the label of sex education sometimes, I think, for kids is like ‘Oh, here we go. We’re going to get that talk.’ Whereas if it is rolled into the curriculum so it’s not seen as this-*
- S1: *As a part of health education.*
- S3: *-yeah.*
- S2: *And it’s not like this big stand-alone thing.*
- S3: *Exactly. So like you say, it just becomes- like alcohol it almost just becomes part of the curriculum. Not that alcohol’s part of the curriculum.*
- C: *Tell me about this curriculum.*
- S1: *The classes meet on Friday at 4 o’ clock.*
- S2: *But even thinking about that, if you take the way that kids study art and music, and the nudity in art and all of that, it’s all part and parcel of the same conversation, right?*
- S3: *Yes, absolutely. And I guess it is introducing it, like you say, in lots of different subjects too so it’s not that stand-alone. Today we’re going to do history, so we’ll talk about it in that. But it’s almost just-*
- S2: *Sneak it in.*
- S3: *-a conversation that’s not called out for-*

- S1: *So there's not 'This is the day we're talking about sex.'*
- S3: *-yeah.*
- S2: *I have a funny story if you want to hear it.*
- C: *At the end I'm going to ask if there's anything else you'd like to share.*
- S2: *We'll come back to the story.*
- S4: *Keep the funny story for the end.*
- C: *What are your thoughts on single-sex sex education versus mixed, so all the kids together, genders combined? Because in some places we still segregate boys and girls and in some contexts we have all students together. What are your thoughts on that?*
- S3: *Yeah, all together. It has to be.*
- C: *All together.*
- S3: *Yeah.*
- S1: *I don't know. I think there's a place for both and I think it shouldn't be entirely one or entirely the other. I think maybe introducing girls to the menstrual cycle and all that kind of stuff as an intro, just sort of 'This is going to happen to you guys.' But the boys need to know this, of course they do, but I think just knowing how embarrassed teenage girls are by absolutely everything. Or perhaps that was just me back at that age. I would have hated having to learn all about the things that we perceived as taboo with boys. Depends on the culture as well. I think if education is streamed single-sex- I don't know. I think it doesn't hurt to take the boys and the girls separately for some of it but not for the whole thing. I think for the body specific things they can go into details. Teaching girls how to use sanitary protection, that kind of conversation I think is maybe easier for the girls if it's just them.*
- S4: *I was going to say that the first impression is all together, but I also agree that there are certain conversations that are easier to have if you separate and you only have people like you... I don't know. Especially at certain ages I think when you have certain types of conversations in mixed groups, mixed can be very awkward, and if you split them-*
- S1: *And a bit more giggling and then they'll get distracted.*
- S4: *-boys one side girls one side then it might be more productive. So I think it's almost a procedural issue. I think the approach should be they all should be exposed to the same things at the same time, but I think in actual terms it very often is the case that it doesn't necessarily work for the best, and you might have more productive conversations if you separate them-*
- S1: *That's just my gut feeling of...*

Appendix 4 – Sample of sex education expert interview transcript

C: *Yes, preparation. So where do you think sex education should happen? Should it happen in schools, should it happen in independent organisations, at home? Where do you think it should happen?*

I: *That's an easy question. I think it should happen everywhere. Formalised sex education, definitely in school, no doubt about it. It's the place where we have already established a community that is more or less at the same developmental level, so that makes total sense. We can make sure that they get things more or less when they're ready for them, and we deem them an appropriate age. Parents of course have a much bigger responsibility than they think in taking part in sex education. So definitely a lot of things should happen at home, also because questions arise when they arise. It's not when we are planning. But there are so many other places where it could happen as well. And already, it is happening, right? New outlets are coming up on Instagram, you have whole YouTube channels that are dedicated to it. Sex education is also a newspaper dedicating a whole Saturday magazine to how do you read images. So I think there are many different places- we should try to implement it in as many different places as we can, I think. And later, because sex education doesn't really end at the end of school. We should continue to educate adults, I think.*

C: *Yeah. That's such a challenge, though, when you talk about continuing to educate adults in anything, you lose the hub. They're no longer in school, so how do you then reach out to them? It's really, really difficult because (inaudible) workplace, or at home, or through TV, or what do you do?*

I: *But having a gender policy at work is a kind of sex education. It's a group of people who have had to write it, and to me that is sex education, they just don't call it that. But we should, as sex educators, think about the potential that lies in these kinds of policies.*

C: *Yeah. We can identify that, so we know that it's happening, but people don't necessarily need to have that explicit of, 'Oh, I am now in sex education when I'm writing this comment'. You said formalised sex education definitely in school. Where would you place sex education? So you spoke a little bit before about - it's almost like it shouldn't be a single subject anymore, that it should be embedded – so what are your thoughts on that? If all schools were to have sex education, which probably they should, where should they place it? How should they organise that?*

I: *So now I'm allowed to talk about my utopia. Is this the part where in my perfect world this is what I want?*

C: *In your perfect world, how would it be?*

I: *In a perfect world for me, okay. If I can tell you just off the top of my head, what I would like to see is two tracks. One, where it's embedded into the schools, the teachers, the people who meet the children every day will take care of this one track, where it's embedded into different things that they do in the way that we've embedded their teaching into projects and longer processes. We should do it in the same way. It should be part of every single subject where it makes sense, so that it's constantly put in. At the same time, I would also really like to see people come from the outside. I would like to have a constant flux of people that they don't know that they might feel differently about, where it can be a different kind of story that you are talking about. And there are all sorts of things. We've already integrated that with drug and alcohol prevention, for example. It's often these people who come from the outside, and they tell stories about 'what happened to me' and 'what happened to the family' and these other things. And I would love to have people come from the outside doing a similar thing in*

sex education, because I think that that makes for a very different kind of attention around the topic. Of course, teachers can't talk about their own abortions. That's not something that we can ask people to do, but we can have conversations on a fairly complex level about abortion if we bring people in from the outside with that kind of experience, for example. So in the perfect world, two different tracks, and the outside track will also have an element of educating parents. I don't think the teachers should take on that task. It's just a lot to put on teachers that are already trying to take care of the academic and the social, and now also the sexual health. So I would love outsiders, freelancers, whatever we call them, to come in and take on the education of parents.

C: In terms of content now, what should a sex education programme include, and why do you think it's important to cover those specific topics?

I: I don't have a specific baseline because I think it would depend very much on the society that you are in, and the community that you are in. So we have certain things that we repeatedly talk about that we need to get covered. The labelling. Knowing your body parts and knowing how they look, how they function, what they are called, is also a prevention programme, right? So that's a minimum requirement. Being able to name your feelings, being able to understand how a relationship works and how you are a good partner is a vital part. And then finally expectations around the actual sexual act, of course super important as well. But on top of that I think in the perfect world the content that comes from the students that you are trying to teach. What are their concerns? They might have incredibly- they might be super literate in media critique. Then we don't need to go into that so much. Maybe then it's not so important to talk about why they see breasts all the time. But in a country like Denmark, we just passed the 50th anniversary for free pornography. That's something we should be discussing. So the fact that something is available and has a history doesn't mean that it shouldn't be discussed. It's not necessarily that you are looking at a lack of knowledge, it's also just that this is the lived reality, and just because something is an established fact, we should still give them the tools to understand it and react to it. So in a way there is maybe a baseline of some sort. And of course, it always come with how do we prevent pregnancies, how do we prevent disease and how do we prevent assault. But on top of that, no matter what, there should always be an element of pleasure. We should be able to tell them about pleasure and why pleasure is important. So in a way, there are particular subjects and then there's the concept of 'what is sex', as something that can harm you and something that will give you extreme pleasure and make you a whole human. You see what I mean? So there are very specific topics and there's a conceptual approach.

Appendix 5 – Example of how key concepts can be assigned to different subject groups

UNESCO key concepts	Explicit Units	Implicit in units
1. Relationships	Advisory	L&L; LA; Arts
2. Values, rights, culture and sexuality	I&S	L&L; LA; Arts
3. Understanding gender	I&S + PHE	All subjects
4. Violence and staying safe	Counseling collapsed activity	Maths
5. Skills for health and wellbeing	PHE	-
6. The human body and development	Science	-
7. Sexuality and sexual behaviour	PHE	L&L; Arts
8. Sexual and reproductive health	PHE & Science	-