Love & let live

Education and sexuality

Trends Shaping Education Spotlight #22

The expansion of school-based sexuality education in most countries has taken place with a strong focus on conveying information about sexual and reproductive health. While this is important so too is addressing the actual social contexts where relationships develop and the normalcy of pleasurable sexual and affective encounters. This is not only aligned with the rights and best interest of children and adolescents, it is also a more effective way to improve sexual and reproductive health outcomes for all.

A positive and inclusive approach to sexuality education that addresses the actual social contexts of sex and relationships is assertive of the rights, dignity and safety of all individuals, irrespectively of their physical and intellectual ability, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation and sex characteristics.

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Learning about sex and relationships

The role of schools in educating the topic of sexuality has traditionally been a controversial topic – and it still is in some countries (Ketting and Ivanova, 2018). Opposing moral and political views clash on what constitutes appropriate behaviour, which values are worth promoting, and what the role of government and schools should be in regulating these aspects of social life vis-à-vis families and individuals.

Let's talk about sex

Primary carers and the home environment are central to children's sexual socialisation and for children to develop health inter-personal relations. At home, children learn values and behavioural expectations through explicit and implicit messages around aspects as varied as love, sex, care or nudity (Shtarkshall, Santelli and Hirsch, 2007). Children learn about sexuality through both parents' acts and omissions.

But parents may struggle to talk about sex and relationships with children. They may lack accurate information on sexual and reproductive health and its associated risks, such as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and precautions, like contraception.

Sexuality refers to our understanding of and relationship to different but closely related elements, including sex and the body; gender and identity; emotional attachment and love; sexual intimacy, pleasure and reproduction

Parents may experience discomfort when addressing sexual matters, or believe that their children are not ready to talk about them, which may lead to conversations taking place after adolescents become sexually active (Malacane and Beckmeyer, 2016). Difficulties around information access, discomfort and misperceptions can be more severe for LGBTQ+ (Kubicek et al., 2010).

Discussing sex can be uncomfortable for children and adolescents as well. As they grow older, adolescents may prefer to incorporate information from sources and confidants outside the home, such as the Internet and TV, peers, teachers and medical professionals (Ketting and Ivanova, 2018), which allows them to widen their perspectives on sexuality (Smetana, Robinson and Rote, 2015).

The use of online communities by LGBTQ+ adolescents, who can face social stigma and discrimination, exemplifies this. Anonymity in digital spaces provides the opportunity to explore identities, participate in discussions and come out in a safe and supportive digital environment (Craig and McInroy, 2014).

It Gets Better Project

Founded in the United States in 2010, It Gets Better is an Internet-based non-profit project aimed to prevent suicide among LGBTQ+ youth. Bringing together short videos that convey the message that their lives will improve, the initiative has expanded internationally to Austria, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Greece, México, Portugal and United Kingdom, among others. Since 2010, over 70 000 individuals of all sexual orientations have shared their stories in the project websites in multiple languages, including English, Greek, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish.

For more information: https://itgetsbetter.org/

Sexuality education at school

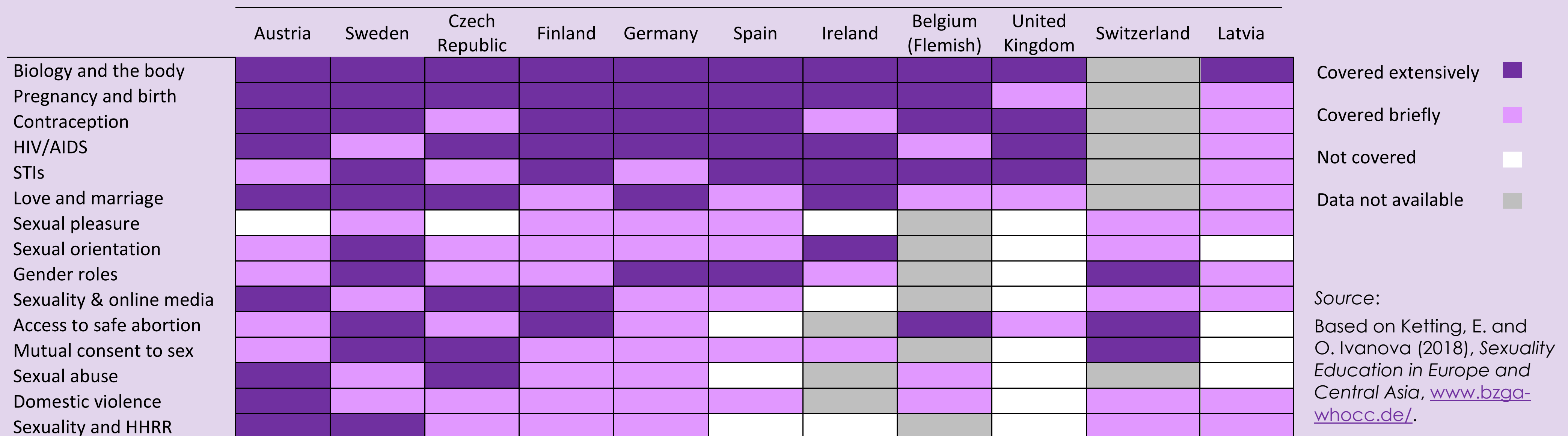
School-based sexuality education has strongly emerged internationally over the last six decades. Figure 1 shows that sexuality education most commonly focuses on improving sexual health outcomes by conveying facts about reproduction and the body and providing young people with accurate medical information on STIs, HIV/AIDS and contraceptive use.

Such approach differs from programmes that challenge the legitimacy of adolescent sexual activity entirely, such as sexual abstinence-based education. Research shows that young people who intend to practice abstinence often fail to do so, suggesting that withholding information about sex from adolescents do not prevent them from having sex but from having sex safely (Santelli et al., 2017). Hence, despite existing voices opposing the teaching of certain sexuality topics, the goal of protecting public health has fuelled the expansion of more comprehensive sexuality education curricula (Lamb, 2013).

All the same, sexuality education is most effective when taking into account the actual social contexts of youth. Figure 1 shows that some systems cover consent, love, gender roles, sexual orientation or pleasure, topics where biological traits and health information become contextualised and meaningful (Haberland, 2015).

Figure 1. What is sexuality education about?

Topics covered in sexuality education in 11 OECD countries and regions, 2018



Source:

Based on Ketting, E. and O. Ivanova (2018), *Sexuality Education in Europe and Central Asia*, www.bzga-whocc.de/.

Sexuality, power and well-being

Avoiding sexual risks, such as engaging in unprotected sex, is in many cases easier said than done. Even when public campaigns and educational programmes provide complete and accurate sexual and reproductive health information, such information can be contradictory with young people's experiences of love and trust, romanticism and passion.

For example, despite advice to use condoms, young females can feel embarrassed and fear being stigmatised for having them (slut-shaming). Young people can struggle to negotiate the use of contraceptives with their sexual partners (e.g. out of a desire to please or to avoid seeming "aggressive" or "prudish"), even though they know that unprotected sex poses a risk to their own health. Power unbalance in sexual relationships is related to higher rates of STIs, HIV/AIDS and teen pregnancy (Haberland and Rogow, 2015).

Social conventions around sexuality determine the context in which relationships develop. The traditional view is that males are expected to be masculine and that females exhibit femininity. These terms have multiple meanings; they are socially constructed and learnt, and therefore vary throughout historical periods and across contexts of culture, class and race. These categories become problematic when they are built on values and attitudes that sustain male domination over women and privilege heterosexuality vis-à-vis other forms of emotional, affectional and sexual attraction (Mikkola, 2019; Halwani, 2020).

The toll of rigid gender stereotypes is serious. Men who adhere to sexist male roles are more likely to aggress against those who do not, and more likely to endorse intimate partner and sexual violence (APA, 2018). Women may normalise harmful social rules too: an average of 8% of women aged 15 to 49 across the OECD considers a husband to be justified in hitting or beating his wife in certain cases, such as when a wife refuses to have sex with her husband or goes out without telling him (OECD, 2019).

In 2019, on average across OECD countries, 15% of women aged 15 to 49 reported having experienced physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner throughout their lifetime

Unequal patterns of power and social stigma affect those belonging to sexual and gender minorities as well. Studies point to higher rates of physical and mental health problems among sexual and gender minorities, with bisexual, transgender and intersex people showing the strongest penalty. This health penalty seems to be at least partly caused by "minority stress", where perception of social rejection acts as a stressor (Valfort, 2017).

The big picture

Harmful gender norms remain

Global campaigns such as #MeToo highlight the impact of persistent gender-based discriminatory views and practices. The clearest example of this is the physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence committed daily against women because they are women (OECD, 2017). However, gender inequality also manifests itself in more ordinary, yet equally pervasive ways.

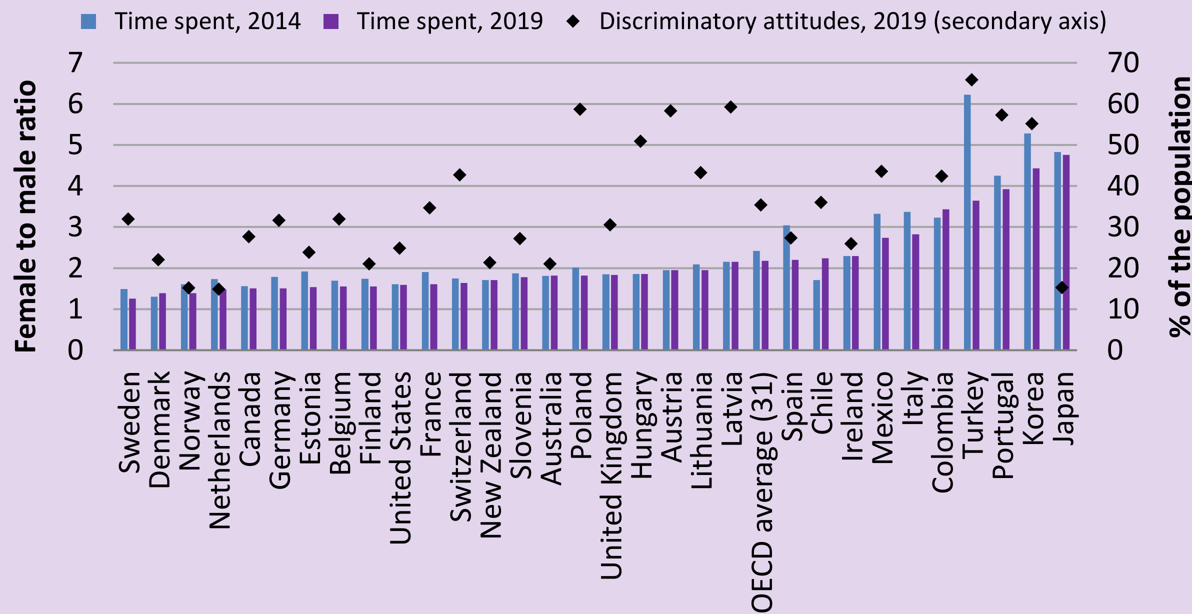
see **Figure 2** →

Figure 2 shows that women spend twice as much time on housework than men on average across 31 OECD countries. Such work is an essential contribution to OECD economies (Ferrant and Thim, 2019), although one that is commonly undervalued and unpaid.

Behind these figures lie old-fashioned attitudes that sustain inequities and allow discrimination to continue to exist. In many countries, these attitudes are common: in 2019, 35% of the population on average across the OECD agreed or strongly agreed that "when a mother works for pay, the children suffer".

Figure 2. Partners in time?

Time spent in and discriminatory attitudes towards unpaid care work, 2014 and 2019



Source: OECD (2019), Gender, Institutions and Development Database (GIB-DB), https://stats.oecd.org/.

Gender and sexual discrimination in schools

Gender and sexual discrimination can manifest in schools through different forms such as bullying, physical and psychological abuse and sexual harassment of children (UNESCO and UN Women, 2016; UNESCO, 2016). Students whose appearance, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression does not conform to traditional social or gender norms are disproportionately affected.

Boys and girls experience similar average levels of bullying internationally, but girls are more likely to experience bullying based on physical appearance; they are more commonly made fun of because of how their face or body looks (UNESCO, 2019).

In 2018, PISA reported that students were more likely to say they feel happy, joyful and cheerful when they were satisfied with the way they look

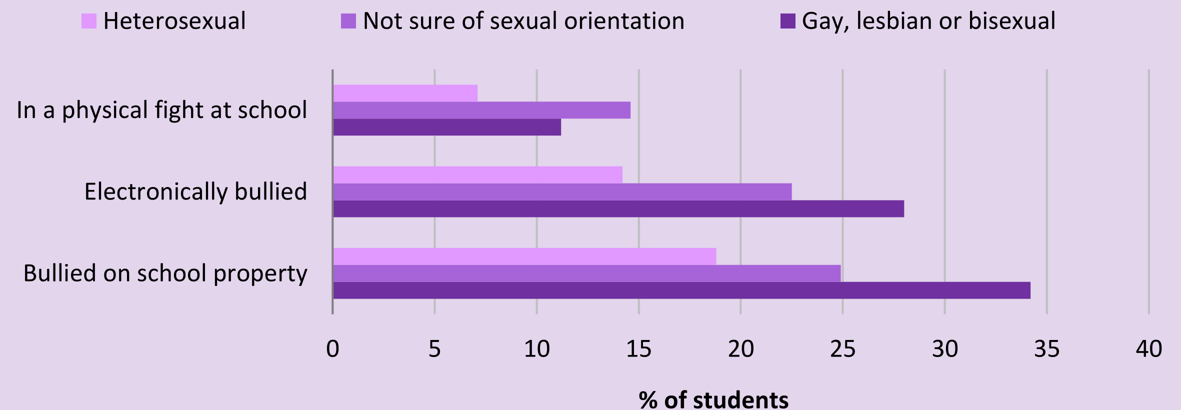
Stereotypes and stigmatisation are clearly reflected in the higher prevalence of bullying against LGBTQ+ students. Figure 3 shows that this is the case in the United States, for example, where bullying rates, offline and on, are higher for those students that are gay, lesbian and bisexual or are not sure of their sexual orientation.

Nonetheless, higher rates of physical and especially verbal and psychological abuse against those perceived as sexually diverse are consistent across countries (Valfort, 2017; UNESCO, 2016 and 2017).

Students suffering from homophobic, biphobic, transphobic and interphobic violence need advice and support. Yet, a comparison of inclusive LGBTQ+ education policies across Council of Europe member countries reveals that only 20 of 47 states provided services or had funded projects to offer such support in 2018. Even though several countries had collected data on bullying based on learners' perceived or actual sexual orientation, gender identity and expression or variations in sex characteristics, only few countries (5) were systematically collecting disaggregated data on these grounds (Ávila, 2018).

Figure 3. Under attack because they are "different"

Percentage of high school students experiencing various forms of bullying (USA), by sexual orientation, 2016



Source: Laura Kann et al. (2016), in UNESCO (2019), *Behind the numbers: Ending school violence and bullying*, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000244756.

Sexuality Education: From pragmatism to empowerment

One of education's roles is to help young people better understand how beliefs and feelings towards sexuality are constructed (Haberland, 2015). To this end, well-delivered comprehensive sexuality education could provide (UNESCO et al., 2018):

- scientifically-accurate, incremental, age- and developmentally-appropriate, gender-sensitive and culturally relevant information about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality
- opportunities to explore values, attitudes and social and cultural norms and rights impacting sexual and social relationships
- opportunities to acquire life skills such as communication and decision-making.

Open dialogue and role-playing can help to engage learners actively in raising questions and developing communication and negotiation skills. Children may start addressing issues such as biological differences related to sex and assessing ideas of gender, desire love and romanticism related to them. Children may assess the representation of beauty in the media, or notions such as merit and equality in the contexts of family and the workplace (UNESCO et al. 2018).

Frame sexuality in a positive way

Education interventions and public campaigns cannot be effective if they do not recognise that experiencing intimacy, expressing desire and finding pleasure are important to most individuals.

Acknowledging the normalcy of physical and psychological pleasure (solo and mutual) in sex and relationships can be a key to building up safer and more egalitarian attitudes to sexuality (Ford et al., 2019; Allen, 2004).

Conversations on sexuality that openly incorporate pleasure align better with individuals' interests and experience, and create more meaningful contexts for attracting people's attention and reflection.

Sexuality education for adults with intellectual disabilities (Australia)

The sexuality of people with intellectual disabilities is often socially negated or neglected. This is visible in social views and portrayals of intellectual disability in the media, but also in the fact that access to sexuality education for people with intellectual disabilities has historically been incomplete to non-existent (Gougeon, 2009).

The Sexual Lives and Respectful Relationships (SLRR) programme in Australia provides sexuality education to adults with intellectual disabilities, with the aims of fostering learning about their rights, sexual health, and violence and abuse prevention.

SLRR covers four themes: talking about sex and relationships, rights and safety, respectful relationships and sexual identity. SLRR works through peer learning and life stories. Across its networks of peer educators and partner organisations, people with intellectual disability work, together with people from violence, sexuality and relationship services, through narratives and dialogue as main tools for learning, and identity and community strengthening (Frawley and O'Shea, 2020).

For more information: www.slrr.com.au/

This is visible if looking into young people's sexually related media habits. For instance, adolescents often rely on (online) peer advice to find out how to practice safe sexting – this is, the private exchange of self-produced sexual images via cell phone or the Internet, a practice generating growing concerns across OECD countries (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019).

According to PISA, about 1 in 4 adolescents (15 year-olds) took part in online groups or forums several times a day or a week in 2018

Adolescents value peer advice because it provides them with information that they may not find in school or in public safety campaigns, which most commonly recommend young people to refrain from sexting entirely, even when reports of privacy violation are overall low and sexting is more prevalent among adults than adolescents (Döring, 2014). On the other hand, peer advice may often be of poor quality, if not directly misleading.

Similarly, a reason why people engage with digital sexual content like pornography is because the Internet and social media emphasise the pleasurable side of sex and relationships (Simon and Daneback, 2013; Manduley et al., 2018). Yet, pornography often depicts pleasure in restrictive and gendered ways (Peter and Valkenburg, 2016), something that many parents struggle to discuss with their children (Zurcher, 2019). There is hence a role for education in addressing gender and power to counterbalance harmful outcomes of certain media consumption habits (Goldstein, 2020). Simultaneously, the digital space offers new possibilities for far-reaching and cost-effective educational interventions (Jolly et al., 2020).

Approaching sexuality education as a place to discuss "sex" may only speak to some students, for example heterosexual men, for whom "sex" may be restrictively understood as vaginal penetration. Instead, discussing "pleasure" widens sexual repertoires to include and legitimise the safety and satisfaction of a broader set of people, including women, LGBTQ+, and people with disabilities (UNFPA, 2018).

Asserting the right of every individual to enjoy satisfying relationships strengthens their sexual agency: adolescents may more easily resist pressures to engage in sexual activity that they do not feel comfortable with when the expectation is for relationships to be pleasant for all parties. Talking pleasure in sexuality education may hence increase individual self-esteem and self-efficacy, enhance sexual communication about consent, desire and preferences, and encourage more egalitarian and healthier attitudes and behaviour overall (Widman et al., 2018 and 2006).

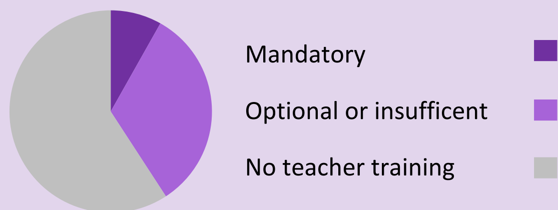
Implementing comprehensive sexuality education

Teachers need to build the confidence, ease, and knowledge required to approach sexuality more positively in diverse classrooms. They play a key role in creating a safe atmosphere for all students, yet many lack the knowledge and condidence to address sexuality matters.

The percentage of teachers receiving training on sexuality varies across countries. Some countries train most teachers, most just a few (Ketting and Ivanova, 2018).

Figure 4. Teacher training on LGBTQ+ awareness

Countries with teacher training on LGBTQ+ issues, Council of Europe member states, 2018



Note: The Council of Europe includes 27 OECD countries

Source: Ávila (2018), *LGBTQI Inclusive Education Report*, https://www.iglyo.com/.

For instance, teacher knowledge to supporting students who are LGBTQ+ remains a challenge. While about half (20) of the Council of Europe member states provide some teacher training on LGBTQ+ awareness, only four of them had introduced mandatory teacher training on these matters in 2018: France, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden (Ávila, 2018).

Systemic and school-based support is needed to ensure teachers have access to high-quality didactic materials and for getting around competing curriculum demands and busy schedules

Targeting teachers directly involved in teaching the subjects which include sexuality education is key. Teachers in close contact with students and families, such as those in counselling roles, could benefit extensively from training as well.

Systemic and school-based support is also needed to ensure teachers have access to high-quality didactic materials. Teachers need support to find the time needed for comprehensive sexuality-related educational interventions, getting around competing curriculum demands and busy schedules, which pressure both learners and teachers themselves.

The pedagogy of sexuality (Chile)

Most effective school-based interventions are interactive and provide a variety of activities complementing factual knowledge acquisition with the development of practical skills, such as communication, and the opportunity for learners to reflect on values and attitudes around sexuality (Montgomery and Knerr, 2018).

As observed in Chile (UNESCO, 2019), a structure that organizes content, objectives and activities, and that provides with an explicit conceptual and values framework on sexuality, is necessary to ensure consistent high-quality teaching across the system. Additionally, teachers need access to training and didactic and evaluation tools that are aligned with the best available evidence and most effective pedagogical approaches.

For more information:
https://unesdoc.unesco.org/

Student voice and community involvement

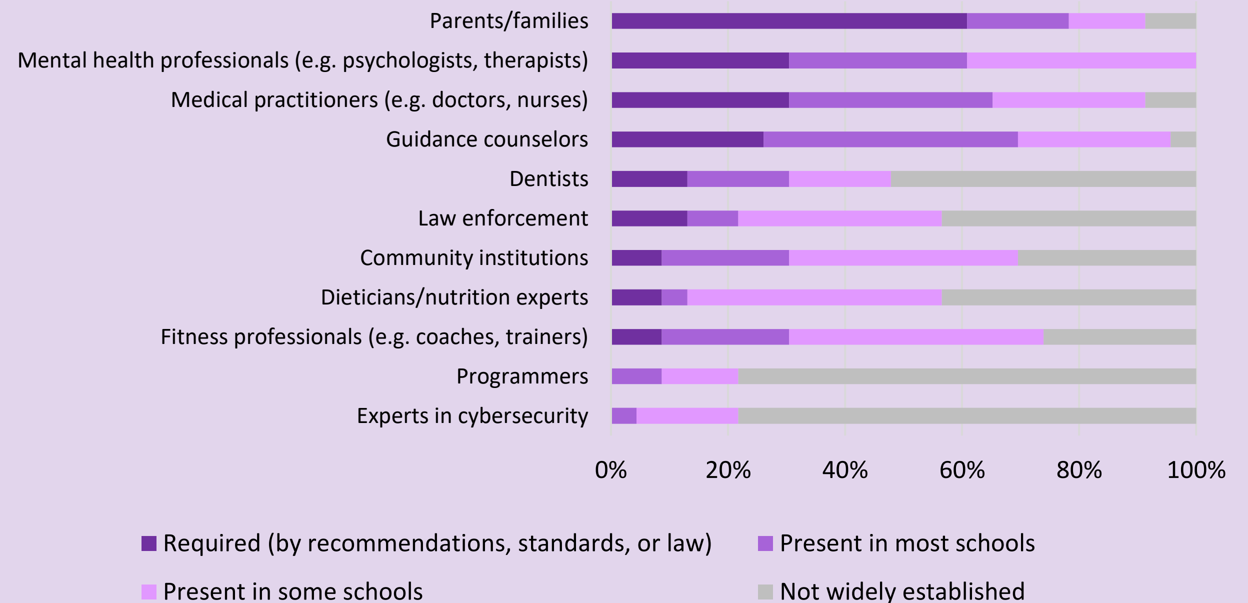
Teachers and schools can work with sexual and reproductive health services to provide additional information and counselling to students. In fact, students may prefer to receive sexuality education from adults other than their familiar teachers if perceiving that sexuality-related conversations introduce awkwardness in their relationships (Pound, 2017). Connecting schools with sexual and reproductive health services has proven to be beneficial to young people's sexual and reproductive health (UNESCO, 2015).

Sexuality education needs to account for the views of students themselves if the aim is to be respective of their rights and effective for their needs

Partnerships with external experts and institutions can help improve the services provided (Burns and Gottschalk, 2019). As shown in Figure 5, countries partner with actors outside the traditional education system to enhance education and well-being, including parents as well as mental health experts and community institutions. For instance, 25 of 47 Council of Europe member states partnered with civil society organisations to develop strategies and/or projects related to LGBTQ+ inclusive education in 2018 (Ávila, 2018).

Figure 5. Schools are not alone

Percentage of countries (24) where schools partner with diverse stakeholders, 2019



Note: Figure represents the percentage of country responses out of 24 OECD countries responding to this question in the survey.
Source: Burns and Gottschalk (2019), *Educating 21st Century Children: Emotional Well-being in the Digital Age*, https://doi.org/10.1787/b7f33425-en.

Learners can and should play an active role in organising, piloting, implementing and improving the sexuality education addressed to them. Youth groups and student associations in the community can provide input on the design, monitoring and evaluation of sexuality education programmes, ensuring that local needs are prioritised and helping schools connect with the learning resources available in their wider environment (UNESCO et al, 2018).

Towards the future

Questions for further thinking:

1. Providing comprehensive sexuality education is important– but **schools have limited time and resources**. Are all the essential elements to foster positive and independent sexual beings currently addressed in your jurisdiction? Which ones should be added in, if any? How can this be done without overloading schools?

2. How are discussions around intimacy, power and pleasure in relationships going to be affected by **technological trends**, such as augmented and virtual reality pornography, sex dolls and robots or online dating and sexual communication (with a consequent rise of remote intimacy) governed by algorithms?

3. What are the implications of growing **political polarisation and the use of sexual politics** (around women's and LGBTQ+ rights) for teaching about sex and relationships in an empowering way?

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