

Designing a new teacher and educator training on Sexuality Education: the SETTE training course

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Abstract

The SETTE training course for teachers and educators on sexuality education addresses a critical gap in the Italian education system, aiming to provide scientifically accurate and inclusive training. This article presents the course's design, content, and methodology, developed as part of the European UNI-T project using the Blended Learning (BL) model to enhance accessibility and engagement. Structured across seven modules, the course equips teachers and educators with essential tools for addressing complex topics such as sexual identity, relationships and consent, homophobia, biphobia, and sexual rights. Each module combines evidence-based knowledge with reflective practices, fostering personal and professional growth and preparing teachers and educators to cultivate inclusive, respectful, healthy, safe, and informed school environments. The anticipated outcomes include enhanced competencies, awareness of the importance of a gender-based perspective, and greater sensitivity to disabilities, neurodivergences, and individual differences. Additionally, it aims to establish a foundation for a respectful, human rights-oriented approach to sexuality education that is crucial in today's digital and social contexts. The conclusions highlight the SETTE course's potential to promote student well-being, gender equality, and critical digital literacy, contributing to a more inclusive school culture and supporting teachers and educators in addressing evolving societal challenges.

KEYWORDS: Sexuality Education, Blended Learning, In-Service Teachers, Teacher Training, Human Rights.

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1. Introduction

Sexuality is a crucial aspect of every stage of life. Any sexual activities – forming interpersonal relationships, recognizing emotions, respecting oneself and others, and developing skills and awareness around sexuality – are areas that require comprehensive and scientifically accurate education. The central sexuality education (SE) thematic areas are: Human body, development, and sexual identity; Sexual health, reproduction, and parenthood; Relationships, lifestyles, and consent-respect; Emotions and affection; Sexuality (behaviors,

health, and well-being); Rights, values, and norms; Social, cultural, and personal beliefs (IPPF, 2010; 2017; WHO, 2010). The gold standard approach is known as Comprehensive SE (CSE), which is more effective compared to the other two methods: Abstinence-only and Abstinence-”plus” (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021). The Abstinence-only approach considers sexuality solely as heterosexual intercourse, and it is tied to promoting abstinence from premarital sexual intercourse. This approach is often conservative and monosexual, relying on fear of sexual risks and shame to convey sexual information. However, these strategies can be ineffective regarding the aim – to avoid pre-matrimonial sexual intercourse or unwanted pregnancies – and may reinforce cisheteronormative stereotypes and false myths about promiscuity (Heels, 2019; Hoefer & Hoefer, 2017). On the other hand, the Abstinence-”plus” approach can be understood as a medical prevention one. It includes discussions on sexual health topics, such as contraception and sexually transmitted infections and diseases (STIs/STDs). However, it does not always address aspects related to sexual pleasure, relationships, or – for example – active engagement, auto-

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determination, consent, and respect during sexual intercourse. Instead, it focuses primarily on potential negative consequences. While aiming to provide information for safe sexual practices, the Abstinence-“plus” approach risks replicating the same effects as the Abstinence-only approach: fostering fear, shame, guilt, and anxiety. Additionally, the Abstinence-“plus” approach may hinder gender equality in contraceptive decision-making by emphasizing only the importance of male condoms (Carmichael & Amiri, 2024; Miedema et al., 2020; Petruccioli, 2002). Both approaches share a common perspective on sexuality in a broader sense, addressing the risks rather than its benefits and positive aspects (Hawkins, 2024). As a result, their impact is limited compared to the CSE approach. Conversely, CSE promotes individual and societal health, academic success, well-being, awareness, and informed decision-making (Basch, 2011; CDC, 2010; FoSE, 2020; Halliwell et al., 2016; Healy-Cullen et al., 2024; Osborn et al., 2019; Putri, 2022; Schneider & Hirsch, 2020; Scott et al., 2020; Wiefferink et al., 2005). CSE should be introduced within the school system to provide continuous education, helping young people grow in a safe and healthy environment, protecting all sexual identities in an intersectional manner (Epps et al., 2023; Formby & Donovan, 2020; O’Farrell et al., 2021). However, sexuality is often explored independently, sometimes in restrictive environments or through media, social networks, or peers (Fernández et al., 2016; Pizzi et al., 2019). In these cases – using the internet and other sources of information or different approaches than CSE – misinformation is common, which can lead to negative consequences (Döring, 2021; Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021; Nikkelen et al., 2020). This highlights the importance of formal SE in schools that fosters open dialogue and discussion, capable of shaping reflective and informed individuals on both current and historical sexual and relational issues. It enables students to contextualize, recognize, and respect diversity and appreciate the progress made over time, ultimately promoting a positive, healthy, and safe view of sexuality. Global comparisons published by UNESCO (2021; 2023), in which Italy is not included, emphasize the need for professional training. Italy does not yet have mandatory CSE in school or professional educational and teaching courses, although several law proposals aimed to achieve CSE implementation in formal education and training contexts (Bruno, 2024). Teachers and educators can affect students’ lifelong learning and success, development of beliefs and attitudes, and well-being through teaching characteristics or the relationships they can create in school and classroom environments (Blazar & Kraft, 2017). These reports highlight the importance of investing in pedagogical knowledge, enhancing skills for offering CSE in schools and researching effective training models.

This need for training aligns with the UNI-T project¹, a collaborative initiative launched in July 2022 within the CIVIS alliance – a network of European universities to

enhance teachers’ and educators’ education across Europe through innovative, international, and practical approaches. Specifically, Work Package 2 (WP2) focuses on developing and implementing blended learning modules (BLMs) designed for pre-service and in-service teachers and educators. These modules emphasize European educational topics, fostering collaboration between educators and institutions locally and internationally. The four strategies of UNI-T enable several mobility mechanisms, including both physical and virtual formats. For the first time, starting in 2025, the project will introduce a course dedicated to SE. This pilot training will focus on Italian in-service teachers and educators, offering opportunities for mobility within the national context and online exchanges of knowledge, experiences, and practices among participants. The decision to begin with the Italian context is due to the legal, educational, cultural, and social differences among the countries involved in the UNI-T project. Italy is one of the few countries that do not include SE in their school programs (IPPF, 2018).

2. Research Methods

This study describes the design of a pilot teacher and educator training program on SE, a topic notably absent in the Italian educational context. For this reason, the project is framed as mixed-method action research (Lucisano & Salerni, 2002). It adopts an instrumental evaluative case study approach, meaning “it is a means to an end” (Thomas, 2021, p. 128), specifically to observe and understand how and whether the training would be effective. Regarding quantitative research tools, the study will employ pre- and post-training questionnaires designed ad hoc to evaluate teacher and educator knowledge changes. Additionally, feedback questionnaires will be used throughout the training to monitor progress. As for qualitative research tools, the methodology will prioritize active and constructive group discussions, complemented by observing group dynamics during in-person or online sessions. Moreover, the study incorporates a qualitative methodology to explore and express social representations (SR), conceptualized as a social construct that allows the analysis of what has been internalized at the individual and the sociocultural levels (Sammut, 2015). The in-person workshop activities will be grounded in the Theory of SR (Martikainen & Hakoköngäs, 2023), which investigates socially shared forms, contents, and functions of knowledge. The aim is to raise teachers’ and educators’ awareness of the beliefs and stereotypes surrounding sexuality using the drawing method and discussions, allowing them to externalize these SR (Moscovici, 2008) and deconstruct stereotypical social knowledge. Drawing encourages meaning-making processes and elicits rich, personally engaging data without requiring specific technical skills (Lyon, 2020). The training will explore SR at multiple

levels, granting access to deeply ingrained beliefs or knowledge (Martikainen, 2020). In this study, the drawing method will be specifically used to analyze the objectification process, aiming to make SR visible and tangible for group discussion; individually created images allow for analysis at the personal level while facilitating discussion at the broader level of shared and social meanings (Hakoköngäs, 2017).

3. Teaching method

The literature on SE teachers' and educators' education seems predominantly focused on intervention or workshops and specific emergency content to help teachers and educators address sexual topics in schools (Decker et al., 2022). However, the evaluation of educational projects shows positive results, indicating an increase in attitudes toward sexual topics, with teachers and educators more inclined to integrate CSE into their school activities (Hanass-Hancock et al., 2018; Gamba, 2020). Several studies show teachers' and educators' perceptions of the lack of knowledge and skills, the willingness to be trained and teach CSE in the future, and the factors that could facilitate or challenge its implementation (Ang & Lee, 2017; Balter et al., 2018; Brouskeli & Sapountzis, 2017; Bruno et al., 2024; Jiménez-Ríos et al., 2023; Klein, 2021). International recommendations state the importance of discussing CSE topics in a three-to-five-day training and educational intervention (Plan International, 2020a), to deconstruct own beliefs, and to challenge opinions, culture, and values that may impact and convey messages to students (Silva et al., 2021). In Italy, teacher and educator training in SE is independent; teachers and educators can decide whether to engage in courses outside of academic and university programs and whether to incorporate sexual health topics into their school activities or lessons. The high cost of these training programs is one factor that makes engaging in them difficult. The Italian Federation of Scientific Sexology (in Italian, FISS), established in the 2000s, has promoted training standards and programs tailored to various professionals: clinical sexologists, sexual counselors, and experts in SE. The latter program qualifies individuals as experts in promoting and protecting sexual health, equipping them to design and lead projects or interventions on sexual topics. It is also the only course accessible to those without a degree in Psychology. As a result, teachers and educators can opt for this 100-hour training program (Rossi et al., 2019), with an average cost of 1,400 euros in Italian institutions affiliated with FISS2.

The pilot teacher and educator training for the UNI-T project on SE had to consider the literature and the existence of training to design the pilot training with an evidence-based approach. Furthermore, the pilot teacher and educator training aligns with UNI-T's Blended

learning methodology (BL). The UNI-T project adopts this model to cater to the needs of teachers and educators in diverse contexts, offering a transformative experience that enhances both technological competence and pedagogical innovation.

The BL method chosen for the SETTE course is widely recognized as a practical methodology for teacher and educator training, as it balances face-to-face and online learning, creating a hybrid instructional approach and maximizing flexibility, accessibility, and resource optimization (Graham et al., 2003). This hybrid approach is particularly fruitful for SE training, providing a safe space to explore sensitive topics and allowing participants to reflect independently on complex content. Recent studies underscore the efficacy of BL in the social sciences, showing how it fosters more profound learning and the development of critical competencies, especially in educational contexts dealing with sensitive issues like SE (Coyle et al., 2019). Specifically, BL enhances interaction and collaboration among teachers and educators, building a support network and a culture of continuous learning, which is essential for promoting inclusive and responsible teaching practices.

As WP2 is led by the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, it contributes significantly to the European framework of teachers' and educators' education, supporting the digital transition in schools and promoting the development of critical digital skills.

The BL model proposed in WP2 utilizes a remote framework, allowing for synchronous and asynchronous interactions between educators and learners across different geographies. This approach enables a rethinking of conventional teaching methodologies by combining various digital tools and face-to-face interactions to enhance collaboration and foster personalized learning (Kumar et al., 2021). The flexibility offered by BL is particularly suited for professional teachers' and educators' education, where integrating educational technologies and collaborative international projects is increasingly critical (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

WP2's BL modules are structured to provide participants with access to various digital resources (videos, documents, podcasts) hosted on the CIVIS Moodle platform, facilitating interactive and reflective learning processes. The modules encourage active engagement and a deeper understanding of European education topics using tools such as quizzes, forums, and collaborative activities. Furthermore, we integrate the Open Badge (OB) pedagogical strategies and framework into BL modules for the SETTE course structure. The OB certifications aim to enhance the competencies of pre-service teachers and educators through creative methodologies and participatory assessments, promoting skills aligned with educational and social needs and integrating informal and non-formal learning within the university framework. The certifications

support lifelong learning pathways, fostering dialogue between life contexts, academic experiences, and broader community settings while contributing to self-awareness and developing a multifaceted personal and professional identity (du Méric et al., 2022; 2024). At the Sapienza University of Rome, the OB certificates have recently implemented the OB EduSex. We developed the SETTE training for in-service teachers and educators, combining this new OB pre-service teachers and educator training and the BL method for UNI-T.

This innovative, integrated, and intersectional pedagogical approach aligns with the broader goals of education for sustainable development as it incorporates various Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Specifically, by providing new teacher and educator training on SE, the global project aims to achieve goals number 3 (Good health and well-being), 4 (Quality education), and 5 (Gender equality), emphasizing the role of educators in fostering a more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable future (IPPF, 2016; UN, 2015; UNESCO, 2023). In this context, the UNI-T project aims to enhance teaching skills and build a strong community of professionals equipped to navigate and address complex global challenges through education. Aligning the literature on SE training for teachers and educators with the methodologies of the UNI-T project with a primary focus on the Italian context, the pilot teacher and educator training will offer several modules on specific CSE topics, which will be independently studied using the BL method. In designing the training, the decision was made not to impose a strict timeline for the conclusion of each module. This approach allows participants to reflect on their positions and beliefs, increasing their knowledge and awareness of CSE topics. In a typical three-to-five-day training, Italian teachers and educators could find it difficult to deconstruct their false sexual myths or misconceptions, challenging their beliefs, opinions, and attitudes while enhancing their knowledge and skills in CSE educational practices. By extending the days of training, teachers and educators can challenge and reconstruct their previous knowledge in a common setting and then independently study scientifically accurate information on CSE topics. The results section will provide further specific information regarding the SETTE course structure.

Therefore, this training extends the traditional format proposed by Plan International (2020a), offering an alternative program that requires only a one-time travel cost, providing a longer, more in-depth, socio-culturally contextualized, and school-specific learning experience.

4. Results

The Sexuality Education Training for Teachers and Educators (SETTE) course arises within and to move

forward the specific Italian context, innovating at the same time the international framework and expanding the training opportunity offered by the UNI-T project. The SETTE course is a BL course structured into seven modules to delve into each central CSE thematic area (Plan International 2020b; 2020c; UNESCO, 2018; WHO, 2010). Each module will include a summary of recommended activities and materials that can be implemented for different age groups, as well as videos, online references, or book recommendations. At the end of each module, there will be self-assessment questions on knowledge, expectations, and reflections regarding the module.

Below is a brief description of the module structure and the topics they will address.

The first two sessions will be in-person in 2025 – one on Friday morning and one the following Saturday morning. The sessions will introduce SE, the concept with the definitions, and the three known approaches. The course, beginning with the separation of the idea of sexuality as just sexual intercourse, will address application methodologies, strategies, and materials, sharing opinions and experiences or transversal practices applicable even to sexual topics. Furthermore, the approach utilized will focus on sexual rights, promoting how to protect themselves in the school context and ensuring safe and healthy sexual development for everyone. Lastly, school planning for interventions, projects, or lessons on CSE topics will be discussed. In these two days, teachers and educators will actively participate to challenge their social representations of sexuality. Additionally, participants will complete an initial questionnaire to assess their previous knowledge of CSE topics.

The course will continue online for the remaining six modules with more independent learning. The second module will cover consent and relationships topics, also addressing the school and classroom context by describing the phenomena of homophobia, transphobia, bullying, and discrimination regarding sexuality. Finally, the topic of online sexual activities will be addressed, with a specific focus on sexting, which has become increasingly popular among younger people in recent years. The third module will cover physical and sexual development, childhood sexual behaviors, emotions, body development and emotions toward it, and own self-determination. The fourth module will specifically address sexual identity with its four components – assigned sex at birth, gender identity, sexual and romantic orientation, and gender expression – and its development, with a focus on discrimination and existing forms of gender stereotypes, sexual stigma, heterosexism, and social heteronormativity.

The fifth module focuses on adolescence and adulthood, sexual pleasure and sexual dysfunctions, and desire. The sixth module will specifically address the theme of visibility, not inclusion because it will offer training on people that society includes but does not see or consider.

From disability to the importance of broad language according to the various sexual identities. Finally, the seventh module will conclude the training by covering contraception, sexually transmitted infections and diseases, and voluntary termination of pregnancy.

The SETTE course does not request a rigid timeline to complete the single modules; however, there will be an online meeting between the fourth and fifth modules to discuss the topics covered in the first modules. Teachers and educators must complete the first four modules individually before the day of the online middle meeting, which aims to monitor the development of their knowledge, competencies, awareness, and the ongoing course. At the end of the training, a final assessment questionnaire with closed and open questions will be administered; the questions will be on the specific topics of the SETTE course's modules and their perception of the general course structure, whether it was helpful, coherent, productive, sufficient, or interesting. The course is completed if all modules and the final questionnaire have been adequately completed. The final questionnaire will be matched for each participant to the initial questionnaire administered during the first two days of the face-to-face session. This will allow for the assessment of participants' knowledge, competencies, and awareness at the end of the training, as well as the assessment of the efficacy of the training self.

Each module provides a package that includes PowerPoint presentations, additional references, and material to explore the topic in greater depth. To those who want to explore the contents and increase their knowledge of the Italian context, it is possible to download the package in English. However, some pilot teacher and educator training steps are exclusively in Italian. Those are the two days of face-to-face meetings in Rome, the middle course online meeting, and the online final questionnaire.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The SETTE course on SE will fill a critical gap in Italian teacher and educator training, providing the opportunity to enhance teachers' and educators' technical competencies and foster a reflective approach that is essential when addressing complex, sensitive subjects like sexuality. By covering diverse topics – such as sexual identity, consent, and anti-discrimination – the course intends to promote inclusivity, aligning with recent calls for educational and training programs that support social cohesion and equality (Jiménez-Ríos et al., 2023). Research increasingly highlights the role of Comprehensive SE (CSE) in reducing prejudice and fostering a safe, respectful school culture, which is crucial for student well-being and academic engagement (Epps et al., 2023; Osborn et al., 2019).

Furthermore, as global studies suggest, CSE plays a significant role in equipping young people with the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate the complexities of digital and social environments, where misinformation around sexuality often circulates (Döring, 2021). This is particularly relevant in the context of digital-native students who encounter sexual content online but lack the formal education to interpret it constructively. The SETTE course, therefore, will hopefully contribute to an important paradigm shift, positioning SE within a framework of human rights and digital literacy, both vital in contemporary education (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021).

In this sense, the SETTE course provides immediate benefits to teachers and educators regarding knowledge, skills, and strategies one can rely on. Moreover, it aligns with broader educational reforms that advocate for human rights-based education. Future studies and analyses will be necessary to assess the efficacy of the SETTE course once it is completed. Further research is encouraged to explore the long-term impacts on teachers, educators, and student attitudes, as well as the potential of the SETTE model to support a rights-oriented, digitally literate generation equipped to navigate complex social landscapes responsibly.

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