RESULT 1
(WP2)

FUNSEED
FOR AN INCLUSIVE & RESPONSIBLE SEXUAL EDUCATION

Teachers talking to teachers about sexual education - Needs and Gaps & collection of best practices

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Date: March 11-12, 2024 Location:

Zagreb, Croatia

Participants: Teachers from Spain, Croatia, and the Czech Republic

Introduction

The Peer Learning activity, as part of the Erasmus+ project "Promoting Responsible Citizenship and Inclusion in the Classroom Through Sexual Education (FUNSEX)," convened educators from across Europe. The event, held in Zagreb on March 11-12, 2024, aimed to explore the current needs of young people, teachers and parents regarding sexual education.

Objectives

The primary objective was to identify the challenges faced by students, their parents and educators concerning sexual education. Through collaborative discussions and exchanges of experiences, participants sought to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues. The insights gathered are to be used for the development of reliable materials and training programs for teachers.

Methodology

The methodology employed was directed collaborative work, structured around four thematic blocks:

Identifying Needs: Participants delved into the questions and concerns raised by teachers regarding sexual *education*.

1. Technical Knowledge: Exploration of the essential knowledge and information required for effective sexual education.

2. Transmitting Skills: Discussions centered on techniques and tools for teaching sexual education.

3. Best Practices: Sharing and analyzing successful strategies for imparting sexual education to students.

The participants worked in groups, divided either by country, randomly or according to the age of their students, and within limited time frames. Group work was followed by discussions, where each team shared their findings. Everyone got the opportunity to participate in the discussions.

We utilised posters, sticky notes, and ICT tools such as Slido and Mentimeter.

Key quantitative indicators

- 30 teachers participated in the peer learning activity, representing three European countries: Spain, Croatia and the Czech Republic.
- 1 transnational peer learning event was held over two consecutive days (11–12 March 2024) in Zagreb, Croatia.
- The activity was structured around 4 thematic working blocks: identifying needs, technical knowledge, teaching skills and best practices in sexual education.
- 100% of participants actively contributed to group work and plenary discussions, ensuring a high level of engagement and peer exchange.
- A structured individual survey was completed by all participants, covering a wide range of topics related to sexual education.
- The average relevance rating of the topics assessed was above 5 out of 6, confirming the high perceived importance of the issues addressed by the teachers.

In line with the project impact indicators, each partner engaged 10 teachers, resulting in a total of 30 teachers actively participating in the peer learning activity.

Key Discussions

Participants engaged in reflective discussions addressing a wide range of topics, guided by a set of reflective questions. Some of the key themes explored included:

- The importance of sexual education in the integral formation of individuals.

- Challenges in promoting inclusive and respectful sexual education, including the impact of gender stereotypes and cultural influences.

- The role of families, media, popular culture, and religion in shaping attitudes towards sexuality.

- Strategies for improving communication about sexuality between parents and children.

- Opportunities and challenges of sexual education within the school environment.

- Acronym or name of the project.

Agenda and Activities

The agenda was designed to facilitate productive discussions and networking opportunities among participants. Sessions were structured to allow for focused reflection, sharing of experiences, and the formulation of actionable insights. Cultural activities were proposed after the meetings to promote cultural exchange and relaxation.

Results

The current situation

Groups from different countries identified the following points regarding young people and sexual education:

- Children (> 12) are under a lot of influence by the media, which is reportedly often hipersexualised. On the other hand, there is a lack of communication with parents about sexual relations. Sexual education is not part of the curriculum in schools the participants work at, though they do have their own program of sexual education.
- For adolescents aged 12 to 16, there are different rhythms for development between boys and girls. Regarding these issues, some participants state that teenagers prefer and need separated education and training.
- Around the ages of 14 to 15, adolescents experience their first sexual relations. They reportedly often confuse between sex and love, for example, by thinking that loving someone necessarily means having sex with them. Social media heavily influences youth in this sense, exerting significant pressure on them.

Needs and challenges

Group discussions on needs and challenges in different countries yielded valuable insights into how to structure educational programs and address societal issues

related to sexual education. Overall, these groups emphasized the importance of holistic and comprehensive sexual education that addresses individual needs, societal challenges, and emotional well-being. Here are the main points raised:

- The necessity for comprehensive sexual education in schools that integrates sex into a broader understanding of personhood, love, relationships, self- awareness, and cultural contexts.
- Families have the pivotal role in shaping individuals' understanding of love and relationships. Issues such as rising divorce rates and abortion rates, underscore the importance of stable family structures.
- The consequences of consuming pornography, hipersexualisation and ideological bias need to be analysed critically.
- There are gaps in teacher training to discuss social media pressures, emphasising the need for improved communication and trust between them, students and their parents.
- There is a lack of transparent and trustworthy sources of information to empower individuals to make informed decisions.
- Parents need training and support regarding healthy family dynamics and communication, such as guidelines on the issues of sexting, screen time and inappropriate content in media.
- Adolescents need positive role models, such as well-informed influencers and content creators, and support platforms to navigate through challenges they face.
- Curricula lack sexual education which would go beyond biology classes, and emotional education that would help individuals understand and navigate social contexts effectively.
- There is a need for collaboration between private (Catholic) schools and public schools.
- Young people should have access to information about sexuality tailored to their developmental stages.

Best practices

The participants have shared their experiences with already existing programs on sexual education.

It was concluded that implementing external programs focused on specific topics, such as pornography or Natural Family Planning (NFP), can provide valuable insights for both parents and secondary school children. Similarly structured educational initiatives like the "Education for Love" (*Odgoj za ljubav*), tailored to various grade levels and supplemented with translated materials for younger students, offer comprehensive approaches to sexual education. Collaborating with organisations, such as TEENSTAR, or third-party associations and NGOs enriches these efforts by providing additional expertise and resources. Furthermore, ensuring parental involvement and consent through proactive communication strategies fosters a supportive environment for discussing sensitive topics with children.

Sessions designed based on surveys can effectively address the unique needs and questions of students regarding sexual education. Additionally, paying attention to small details, such as acknowledging sexual differences between males and females from an early age, contributes to a more inclusive and respectful learning environment. Encouraging activities like Debate Leagues or similar forums can facilitate open discussions on challenging issues like pornography, video game addiction, and social media. These initiatives not only promote critical thinking but also foster dialogue among students, enriching their understanding of complex societal issues.

Bad experiences and fears

Educators in the Czech Republic face challenges due to a lack of materials, government support, and training. This issue is further complicated when families do not trust the programs, leading to students leaving them. The situation is exacerbated by a lack of sexual education programs for students under 10 years old.

Teachers often find themselves in difficult situations, such as having to respond naturally to controversial topics like homosexuality, condom use, and premarital relationships. They also have to deal with situations involving nudity among kids, alcohol use, sexting, blackmail through fake nudes, anorexia due to others' laughter, and pregnant students in class.

Cases of sexual abuse in families or the school, sexual identity problems in students and bullying on social media are also prevalent. Children often ask about changes in their bodies that they don't understand. Internet access has led to situations like a boy sending a pornographic picture to another boy, and children touching themselves or reacting defensively when taught about human nature.

Teachers fear not knowing how to deal with these situations, dealing with parents who have different opinions on life values, attitudes, and educational approaches, and how to apply the content of the public law in schools where the majority of parents or students does not support it. There's fear around gender change situations, being accused of sexual abuse, and the consequences of these situations in families. Teachers fear accusations, situations of sexual abuse involving teachers, and not having enough knowledge to behave appropriately in each group. There's fear around how families will react to explanations, the influence of ideologies on families, and situations where a pupil is abused. There's also fear around ideological bias, its invasiveness, the lack of knowledge, and girls being afraid of boys. These fears and challenges highlight the need for comprehensive support and training for educators.

Relevant topics for sexual education

Regarding the participants' priorities related to sexual education, for example, what topics they find most important to discuss or learn about, the survey which was filled in individually shows that they consider all the mentioned topics of very high

importance. The average rating of all the topics, on a scale from 1 to 6, is higher than 5.

Topics or questions that stand out have to do with the communication with parents, prevention of harmful behaviours like the use of pornography, and teaching respect for oneself and others' bodies. Meanwhile, topics such as the differentiation between healthy behaviours and abuse, education about contraceptive methods, and addressing sexually transmitted diseases were rated lower in importance.

Highly Important Topics (Average Rating > 5.5):

1. How can I work with parents to foster a trusting environment at home to talk about sexuality? - 5.77
2. Where can I find reliable information/materials to address these issues? - 5.63
3. How can pornography use be prevented? - 5.63
4. Which aspects of sex education are the parents' responsibility and which are the school's? - 5.59
5. How can I teach respect for one's own (and others') body? - 5.59

Moderately Important Topics (Average Rating between 5.0 and 5.5):

1. How does the content of what is taught vary depending on age? - 5.55
2. What are the main harms to the person generated by consuming pornography? - 5.50
3. How can I work on sexual identity with children? - 5.50
4. How can affectivity vs. sexuality be taught? - 5.50
5. How can I teach about intimacy in relationships? - 5.46 Less

Important Topics (Average Rating < 5.0)

1. How are mental health factors related to a healthy development of sexuality? - 5.41
2. At what age should we start providing sex education? Why? - 5.41
3. How do I respond to a student's uncomfortable questions or seeking advice? - 5.37
4. How do masculinity and femininity differ? - 5.28
5. How can I teach about love in contrast to falling in love? - 5.23
6. How does healthy sexuality manifest itself early in life? - 5.23
7. How do we identify between education and over-information on sexuality? - 5.23
8. How do I differentiate between infantile behaviors and early manifestations of sexual identity concerns? - 5.23
9. How does culture/social group impact sexual identity concerns in youth? - 5.22
10. How does mental health relate to sexual identification? - 5.19 Ideas

for a sexual education program in schools

Here is how the participants that sexual education would look like in schools:

Education in schools should be holistic, integrating sexuality with emotions, love, and relationships. It should nurture critical thinking, empower young people to set boundaries, and promote discussions with real-life examples. Topics should include body differences, emotions, the spiritual dimension of the human being, social responsibility, and communication skills, with a focus on friendship and respect. The curriculum should be compact, incorporating anthropological and biological aspects, and reflect the current context to foster resilience.

Tailored programs for different ages and genders should cover body awareness, relationships, and self-respect, with sex seen as part of love. Collaboration between teachers and parents is vital, ensuring parents are informed and primary teachers address emotional regulation and body knowledge early on.

"Collective summary: briefly summarize the main topics and key points discussed during the peer learning session."

Based on the survey responses, the event delved into sexual education, covering topics like its structure in schools, diverse age group needs, and project goals. Participants emphasized holistic views of individuals, including biology, emotions, and relationships. They stressed trust between parents and students for open dialogue.

Discussions revolved around program points for schools and teacher concerns, with differing perspectives among participating countries. They identified needs, shared experiences, and highlighted the child's dignity as pivotal.

Participants examined sexuality topics like identity and legal aspects, sharing experiences and addressing education course content. They discussed challenges educators face and shared good practices, emphasizing trust and cultural awareness.

"Identification of learnings: share one or two important learnings they have gained during the session. This may include new knowledge, acquire skills, or expanded perspectives."

Sex education covers a wide range of themes, from anthropology to legal aspects, fostering critical thinking and openness to discussion. Participants expressed a desire to learn more and contribute to society in this field, drawing inspiration from concrete experiences shared.

Key findings highlighted the relevance of all aspects of sexual education, including digital safety and active citizenship. A holistic approach to educating both parents and children was emphasized, recognizing the interconnectedness of emotional, spiritual, and physical aspects of human sexuality.

Despite differing governmental approaches in each country, common challenges were identified, particularly regarding teacher preparedness to address the topic with children. Collaboration at the EU level sparked enthusiasm for addressing these challenges collectively.

Participants acknowledged a lack of preparedness among teachers to discuss sexuality with students, emphasizing the importance of early education and holistic understanding. They stressed the need for comprehensive programs and mutual support among educators to effectively address these issues.

"Highlighting key conclusions: identify and highlight the most relevant or significant conclusions arising from the discussions and activities conducted."

According to the feedback, it's vital to approach sexual education positively and comprehensively, fostering healthy attitudes across all perspectives.
Key observations include a common concern about the lack of training among educators and a shared desire to address the topic openly and positively. Building trust between parents and students is seen as essential.

There's consensus on the need for a holistic sexual education starting from kindergarten, but a lack of appropriate materials and training for teachers remains a challenge. Establishing effective communication channels between teachers, children, and parents, along with creating engaging educational resources, is crucial.

Participants expressed a sense of urgency and a newfound confidence in discussing sexuality with students. They stressed the importance of approaching the topic from various perspectives, including professional, cultural, and religious, to ensure a respectful and dignified approach.

"Comparison of viewpoints: reflect on the different perspectives and opinions that emerged during the session and discuss how these contributed to their understanding of the topic."

Participants shared a common goal but encountered diverse challenges. Croatia's more conservative society presented unique obstacles compared to Spain and the Czech Republic. Collaborating with like-minded participants provided reassurance as the participants found alignment in their perspectives.

Interacting with diverse viewpoints broadened understanding and highlighted the significance of the subject. Debates, particularly about program titles, revealed varying sensitivities across countries. Spain approached the topic openly, Croatia leaned more conservatively, while the Czech Republic struck a balance between reserve and tolerance.

Recognizing these differences prompted tailored approaches to meet the needs of teachers from various cultural contexts, considering nuances in language and directness. Exchanging experiences with participants from different countries proved invaluable, shedding light on both shared and distinct challenges influenced by social, political, and historical factors.

Key insights included the importance of adapting teaching and communication methods based on the child's age and distinguishing between sexuality education and sex education. Cultural disparities, influenced by factors such as ideological bias and different views on feminism, shaped perspectives on sexuality.

Discussions also led to reflections on the project's name and emphasized the necessity of a comprehensive approach beyond traditional sexual education.

"Practical application: reflect on how they plan to apply the knowledge gained in their own practices or work situations."

The initiation of the Education for Love project across various institutions has been encouraging among participants from Croatia. This enthusiasm is further fueled by some participants enrolling in an online postgraduate course in sex education, thereby enhancing their understanding and advocating for the subject's importance.

In one school, a teacher wants to take the lead and focus on communicating the project's objectives to school management and forming a collaborative group with colleagues who share a similar mindset.

The necessity for comprehensive sex education has been recognized and highlighted through an exchange of experiences. Participants are not just passive observers but are actively engaged in gathering and processing feedback for project improvement.

"Feedback and reflection: open discussion about the peer learning experience itself, encouraging participants to share feedback, suggestions, and reflections on how to improve future sessions."

The potential of the overall project is recognized as immense, with the added value of occasional personal meetings and sharing of ideas and experiences. The participants expect more learning in the next part. Suggestions were made to include more mixed activities involving different countries and to always provide an introductory part to participants.

The dynamics of the session were found enriching, allowing for sharing with other teachers from the same and different countries. However, language barriers were noted, with some finding it tiring and repetitive to discuss the topic in a non-native language. Organizing a game was suggested to awaken attention.

Some tasks were found to overlap, leading to repetition of work. It was suggested that activities could be better contextualized or problematized to encourage more active participation. Some questions were not clearly articulated, indicating a need for grammar check.

The organization, planning of activities, and efficiency of meetings were highly praised. Recommendations were made for the following event: a guided tour through Prague after the end of the day's program.

It was suggested that the aims of the program at the beginning of the session were not clearly articulated.

Contribution to subsequent project results

The findings of Result 1 constituted the evidence-based foundation for the development of all subsequent project outputs. The needs, gaps, fears and priorities identified by teachers during the peer learning activity were systematically analysed and directly translated into concrete design decisions across the project.

Specifically, the results informed the structure, learning objectives and content of the teacher training programme (Result 2), ensuring alignment with real classroom challenges. They also guided the development of the classroom implementation guidelines (Result 3), enabling teachers to apply the training in age-appropriate and culturally sensitive ways. Furthermore, the most frequently identified concerns—such as pornography exposure, communication with families, digital risks and respect for one's own and others' bodies—directly shaped the thematic focus of the FUN SEED Talks (Result 6) and the digital resources developed within the project.

By grounding all subsequent results in the insights generated through Result 1, the project ensured coherence, relevance and pedagogical quality, avoiding abstract or top-down approaches and reinforcing the central role of teachers as key agents of change.

Conclusion

The Peer Learning activity proved to be a valuable platform for educators to exchange insights, experiences, and best practices related to sexual education. By fostering collaboration and dialogue, the event laid the groundwork for the development of tailored tools and training programs that address the diverse needs of students and educators across Europe.

Various participants from different countries expressed their concern regarding the name of the project, FUNSEX, stating it is misleading and that it does not reflect the main objectives of the overall programme. Based on these observations, it was concluded it should be changed. When choosing the new name, suggestions gathered from all participants through the poll that was carried out using Slido, will be taken into account.

Recommendations

Moving forward, it is recommended to continue fostering collaboration among educators and stakeholders, leveraging the insights gained from the Peer Learning activity to inform the development of effective sexual education initiatives. Additionally, ongoing support and professional development opportunities should be provided to ensure educators are equipped with the necessary skills and resources to deliver comprehensive and inclusive sexual education.