

Our Bodies, Our Future: Expanding Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Mona Kaidbey and Robert Engelman

It is morning at the St. Jan de Doper elementary school, in the Dutch city of Utrecht. Students in all grades are participating in “Spring Fever” week, dedicated to a focused education on sexuality. Lesson plans differ by grade. Eleven-year-olds address sexual orientation and contraception. Eight-year-olds talk about self-image and gender stereotypes. Kindergarteners, some as young as four years old, discuss crushes. Small giggling children raise their hands and talk about how it feels when they hug someone they like. Some talk about embracing their parents or a sibling, while a few mention other students in the class. One boy says a good hug is like “feeling butterflies in my stomach.”¹

The weeklong initiative is part of “Long Live Love,” the Netherlands’ all-ages curriculum in comprehensive sexuality education (CSE). CSE, as defined jointly by several United Nations agencies, is an “age-appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sexuality and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgmental information.” The UN Population Fund (UNFPA) has broadened the definition to cover elements of human rights, gender, and overall life skills, rather than focusing solely on the avoidance of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. (See Box 15–1.)²

As in the Netherlands, course names for CSE in several other European countries indicate a positive, respectful, and nonjudgmental view toward what children will be learning about sexuality and attitudes toward it: “Good Lovers”

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Box 15–1. Comprehensive Sexuality Education: The United Nations Definition

The United Nations Population Fund defines comprehensive sexuality education as a rights-based and gender-focused approach to sexuality education, whether in school or out of school. CSE is curriculum-based education that aims to equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will enable them to develop a positive view of their sexuality, in the context of their emotional and social development. By embracing a holistic vision of sexuality and sexual behavior, which goes beyond a focus on prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, CSE enables children and young people to:

- Acquire accurate information about human sexuality, sexual and reproductive health, and human rights, including about: sexual anatomy and physiology; reproduction, contraception, pregnancy, and childbirth; sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS; family life and interpersonal relationships; culture and sexuality; human rights empowerment, nondiscrimination, equality, and gender roles; sexual behavior and sexual diversity; and sexual abuse, gender-based violence, and harmful practices.
- Explore and nurture positive values and attitudes toward their sexual and reproductive health, and develop self-esteem, respect for human rights, and gender equality. CSE empowers young people to take control of their own behavior and, in turn, treat others with respect, acceptance, tolerance, and empathy, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, or sexual orientation.
- Develop life skills that encourage critical thinking, communication and negotiation, decision making, and assertiveness. These skills can contribute to better and more productive relationships with family members, peers, friends, and romantic or sexual partners.

Source: See endnote 2.

in Belgium; “Love Talks” in Austria. There is no furtiveness, embarrassment, or disapproval in these curricula: just basic education about human bodies, sexual feelings, and sexual behavior—and how to communicate clearly, making sure that such behavior is intentional, safe, pleasurable, and respectful of others, and results in pregnancy only when pregnancy is wanted. This education also takes on issues of gender, rights, and how to relate confidently to romantic and sexual partners—and everyone else.

Welcome to “sex ed,” European-style. Yet in many places worldwide, sexual education still carries the euphemistic label “family life education,” as though sexuality were solely about family formation rather than about individual

feelings and expression, emotional and physical health, and social relations. At its worst, CSE is absent, hushed by negative attitudes, taboos, and stigma. In El Salvador, despite passage of a 2012 law guaranteeing the right to sexuality education, “[b]oys and girls come to have their first sexual relationship without having had any professional information,” Deputy Health Minister Eduardo Espinoza told a reporter for Reuters in mid-2016. “Generally, the information they have comes from other children who are just as misinformed as they are.” More than one-third of all pregnancies in the country occur among girls nineteen or younger, and 41 percent of HIV-positive individuals are from fifteen to nineteen years old.³

At its best, as in parts of Europe and increasingly elsewhere, CSE embraces sexual health as essential to physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being. As often expressed by young people, “sexuality is who we are, not what we do.” Sexuality is a dimension of who we are as human beings, experienced throughout life with diversity of expression, encompassing sexual orientation, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction. Yet no safe, intentional, and harm-free variation of sexuality or its expression is inherently bad or abnormal. It is simply an integral, if sometimes challenging and troublesome, part of each person’s being. To recognize this is an important step toward learning to respect the right of all individuals to express their sexual and gender orientations, free from violence or loss of privilege, and without interference or coercion from others. Learning this is also about learning fundamental values regarding tolerance, compassion, and the dignity of all human beings—values that may serve humanity well as environmental and other stresses accumulate in the rest of this century.⁴

Not surprisingly, such a perspective is controversial and even abhorrent in many cultures and communities. In Colombia, thousands of parents marched in the streets in August 2016 to oppose new national guidelines designed to enforce a court decision that CSE must address sexual diversity and eliminate gender-based harassment in schools. The protestors blamed the Minister of Education for working with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the UN and others to promote homosexuality in Colombia’s schools. Faced with the protests and pressure from leaders of the Catholic Church, the government backed down and disowned the guidelines. Even within the demographic research community, which widely credits expanding education as among the most important contributors to fertility decline, the contribution of CSE itself rarely rates any mention. In the United States, many school curricula on sex, fueled by federal government dollars, limit their teaching to the

value of abstinence, despite abundant evidence that teaching abstinence fails to delay the initiation of sexual intercourse or to reduce rates of teen pregnancy, whereas CSE tends to do both.⁵

Given the rancor of opponents and the apparent indifference of demographic experts, international consensus on the value and importance of CSE is hard to assemble. The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promulgated in 2015, include among their one hundred and sixty-nine targets for 2030 “to ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development.” This target mentions the importance of education on “gender equality, . . . a culture of peace and nonviolence, . . . and appreciation of cultural diversity”—values that inform many CSE programs. But the SDGs and their targets are largely silent on sexuality education itself and the role it could play in sustainable development. This has inspired more than forty youth organizations to launch a global campaign, “Have You Seen My Rights?” to advocate for young people’s right to sexual and reproductive health—including CSE—during the development of the SDGs.⁶

Why Teach Sex?

From the vantage point of educating young people for life in the twenty-first century, it is not hard to see why CSE deserves a secure niche among mandatory courses in an “EarthEd” sustainability curriculum. Environmental and social change show few signs of slowing. In an increasingly crowded and resource-stressed world, young people are more mobile than ever, more socially and economically vulnerable, and more likely to live in insecure urban environments. They are sexually active at early ages, and girls are often forced into early marriage and violent sexual relationships. They are facing the need to adapt to rapid change—in the climate, in technology, and in their prospects for employment and secure shelter—the likes of which no earlier generation has experienced. In such a world, the personal and community consequences of sexually transmitted disease and unintended pregnancy may be more costly than ever.

Human numbers, too, are unprecedented: 7.5 billion people live on Earth in 2017, and more than 1.8 billion of them are from ten to twenty-four years old. More than 2.5 billion people, just over one-third of the total, are children or teenagers, and this proportion is much higher in most less-developed countries. Four-fifths of the world’s teenagers and children live in these countries, where both poverty and fertility tend to be higher and where young people are more likely to encounter obstacles to their rights to education, health,

and freedom from violence. Absent catastrophic increases in death rates, the reproductive decisions that these young people make—and are able to put into effect—will determine the future of world population. And since no human can avoid interacting with the environment—some more intensively than others—the path of population will play a major role in determining the path of ongoing environmental change.⁷

Today, two out of five pregnancies worldwide are unintended. Roughly half of these unintended pregnancies result in live births. Although intentional reproduction is a globally recognized right and is not under siege in any country outside China, some researchers have argued that childbearing does confer a legacy of long-term environmental impacts that parents should ponder when thinking about family size and their own ecological footprint. A world in which every pregnancy is wanted—a key objective of sexuality education—would undoubtedly support a more environmentally and socially sustainable population than today's.⁸

The need for CSE is equally obvious on an individual level. About 16 million adolescent girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen give birth each year, most of them in low- and middle-income countries. Complications from pregnancy and birth are among the leading causes of death among adolescent girls, with unsafe abortion contributing significantly to their mortality. Sexual and gender-based violence is rampant across the world. Half of all sexual assaults take place against girls below the age of sixteen. One out of every three girls and women at some point is a victim of violence induced by an intimate partner.⁹

Dealing with such issues requires recognition of the diversity of the world's young people. Geographic and cultural conditions affect their well-being, the protection of their rights, and their opportunities. Young people may be married girls, migrants, refugees, internally displaced, disabled, ethnic minorities, indigenous, lesbian, gay, transgender, or some combination of these. This



United Nations Photo

A young mother with her child at the Nutrition Rehabilitation Unit for Children at Schiphra Hospital in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

diversity requires the closest possible understanding of the needs of each group and tailoring teaching to their circumstances and the barriers they face. The need for teacher training and sensitivity to individual student needs is acute.

Can and should sexuality education really begin in kindergarten? A key term in the definition of CSE is “age-appropriate.” Attitudes about gender and sexuality are formed early in childhood and consolidate around puberty. Sexual activity of some kind generally begins in the teen years. At the very least, children need to learn at the earliest possible age that no one but family members, close friends, and trusted caregivers should touch them, and that at this age some kinds of touches—those that cause harm or that sexually gratify the toucher—are wrong from anyone. Young children need to learn to respect the bodies of other children and not to bully or otherwise harm others.

One replicable example of working with very young children is the Indonesian program “You and Me,” which was inspired by a similar Dutch program. “You and Me” was developed by the CSE-advocacy group Rutgers WPF and the Indonesia national affiliate of the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). The program is aimed at four-to-six-year-olds and their parents. Topics include “Me and My Body,” “Boys and Girls,” and “My Feelings and Your Feelings,” and the lessons employ games, dolls, and comic books—not only in classes but in schoolyards and parks.¹⁰

As children grow older, the realm of the age-appropriate expands to the maturing bodies of boys and girls and to sex itself, along with abstinence, contraception, sexual safety, and the critical importance of distinguishing consent from refusal in social, emotional, and physical interactions. No means no, which is something all human beings must learn how to decide, to say clearly, to hear accurately, and to respect and obey when heard. These are the ABCs of CSE. When they are not offered in schools, these lessons have no secure place outside the home itself, where such instruction varies dramatically in both quantity and quality.

Even where there is governmental and popular support for CSE, obstacles are formidable. After a three-year legislative debate, Argentina passed a law requiring CSE courses in public schools, only to discover that 60 percent of teachers said they had no idea how to teach it. Beginning in 2008, the government focused on teacher training, prioritizing parts of the country with the highest adolescent pregnancy rates. In the United States, a study of teen pregnancy prevention programs, a core component of CSE, found that parental indifference or opposition and lack of school-district financial support often made the programs difficult to sustain once limited grant funding expired.¹¹

Gaining Support

Defying such barriers, governments and intergovernmental organizations around the world are increasingly expressing support for at least some form of sexuality education. Most recently, in the context of the framing of the SDGs, governments, intergovernmental organizations (including the UN and the World Bank), and civil society groups worked together over two years to develop an international declaration on education, called *Education 2030*. Many among these groups saw sexuality education as a critical dimension of an education that prepares the individual to manage actively and responsibly his or her present and future life trajectory and to navigate safely in a complex physical, social, and economic environment.¹²

Equally important, the UN and other intergovernmental bodies and NGOs have cooperated in offering guidance on CSE—often promoting more holistic approaches that combine traditional sex education with a greater focus on how respect for gender equality and human rights can inform broader tolerance for social diversity and interest in civil participation. A 2010 set of standards for CSE in Europe stressed the importance of sexual well-being beyond health, shifting the mentality of behavior change in favor of facilitating growth and development, a “sex-positive” educational orientation, and respect for rights and diversity.¹³

A 2014 UNFPA document assembled evidence that positive attitudes on gender equality are not just a matter of feel-good political correctness, but actually encourage healthy sexual behavior. One researcher concluded that classes emphasizing critical thinking on gender and power relationships were more than five times as effective in reducing unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections as classes that failed to address gender or power. Similarly, while some governments feel political pressure to focus almost entirely on the prevention of sexually transmitted infection and unintended pregnancy, evidence suggests that more holistic and positive approaches that stress healthy sexuality achieve the same prevention results. Moreover, they may achieve them more effectively, along with a wider range of benefits related to respect for rights and gender and other personal relationships.¹⁴

This evidence adds to a large body of data—often based on self-reporting by young people—demonstrating that exposure to sexuality education decreases high-risk sexual behavior, delays sexual initiation, reduces the numbers of sexual partners, and increases the use of condoms and other forms of contraception. Studies indicate that young people who adopt more

egalitarian attitudes about gender roles or who form more equal intimate heterosexual relationships are more likely than their peers to delay sexual debut, use condoms, and practice contraception. They also have lower rates of sexually transmitted infections, HIV, and unintended pregnancy and are less likely to be in relationships characterized by violence. While there appears to be no peer-reviewed scientific literature exploring the implications of such links to the future of the world's population, let alone its environment, it seems self-evident that the behavior that CSE encourages contributes to a population that is changing more sustainably than currently and that is characterized by healthier human relationships.¹⁵

Sexuality Education in the World

The advance of this research, along with the growth of technical guidance, appears to be having an impact in school classrooms around the world. A recent report by the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) surveyed forty-eight countries and concluded that “[t]he vast majority of countries [surveyed] are now actively embracing the concept [of CSE] and engaging in the process of supporting—or strengthening—its implementation at a national level. This has resulted specifically in ongoing attention to curricula revision in many countries, integration of CSE into the national curriculum, and the development and roll-out of effective teacher training.”¹⁶

The commitment and quality of these efforts vary by region and among and within nations. In much of Latin America and the Caribbean, adolescent pregnancy rates are among the highest in the world. In 2008, health and education ministers in the region agreed on a declaration that combined commitments both to CSE and to the provision of contraceptive services. The region's ministers thus modeled a key linkage in sexuality education between what students learn in class and youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services. Both are needed for healthy sexuality. A recent review by the Western Hemisphere affiliate of IPPF found the highest levels of implementation of “Education for Prevention” in Costa Rica, Argentina, and Uruguay, followed by midlevel implementation in Colombia, Honduras, El Salvador, Peru, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico. The lowest implementation was seen in Chile. Latin American civil society groups have played an important role in ensuring the continuity of efforts at times of political transition and have influenced a new wave of reform to improve the quality and reach of sexuality education across the region.¹⁷

In 2015, a regional declaration related to population and development in Latin America and the Caribbean went so far as to offer a definition of sexual rights, a highly controversial concept internationally. These were defined as “the right to a safe and full sex life, as well as the right to take free, informed, voluntary and responsible decisions on [individuals’] sexuality, sexual orientation, and gender identity.” The declaration stated that CSE should “ensure the effective implementation from early childhood of comprehensive sexuality education programs . . . with respect for the evolving capacity of the child and the informed decisions of adolescents and young people regarding their sexuality.”¹⁸

This ministerial-level leadership on the issue cascaded across the southern Atlantic Ocean. Health and education ministers from twenty governments in East and Southern Africa, where decades of devastation by the HIV pandemic had already led to some advances in sex education, explicitly cited their Western Hemisphere colleagues when they endorsed, in 2013, a declaration whose sole purpose

was to bolster the case that their region’s young people, too, need access to CSE and to sexual and reproductive health services. The impact was much less influential in Central and West Africa, however, where opposition to sexuality education runs high. In that region, girls are far less likely than boys to go to school at all, and child marriage rates are among the highest in the world.¹⁹

Currently, UNFPA and UNESCO are undertaking efforts to engage governments elsewhere in expanding CSE, but no ministerial gatherings similar to those in Latin America and the Caribbean and in Eastern and Southern Africa have yet occurred. In the Middle East and North Africa, only a few countries—notably Algeria, Lebanon, and Tunisia—have in-school sexuality programs. In this region, youth-led networks such as Y-PEER have played the primary role in reaching out-of-school children and young people.²⁰

In Asia and the Pacific, approaches to CSE appear to be as diverse as the region itself, where 57 percent of the world’s under-twenty population lives. A



A volunteer demonstrates correct condom use to secondary school students in Chandigarh, India.

UNESCO review of the experience of twenty-eight countries in the region found that fewer than half had any integration of sexuality education at the primary school level, while slightly more countries included it in secondary schools. Content varies by country, with conservative views about sexuality often governing the educational approach. In some countries, however, gender-related violence has created openings for strengthening the programs, often due to civil society pressure on governments and schools. The movement toward greater emphasis on gender equality appears to be gaining ground in existing programs. Where no programs exist, volunteers often go into schools on their own to engage students on sexuality—as has happened in Kyrgyzstan, with assistance from IPPF. “The response from the children is great because no one else talks to them about these topics,” reports one twenty-three-year-old volunteer.²¹

The leading region for CSE, however, remains Europe—including Eastern Europe. Estonia has pioneered efforts to link sexuality education and reproductive health services, demonstrating the cost-effectiveness of this approach. The national program began in 1997, and two revisions have occurred since then. By 2009, CSE had reached twenty-eight thousand students in three hundred and twenty-nine schools, and research documented significant reductions in pregnancy, abortion, and sexually transmitted infections.²²

Western European countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden are demonstrating the value of holistic sexuality education that stresses not so much behavior change as personal growth and sexual development. While not ignoring the risks that sexual behavior can pose, these risks are subordinated to the development of personal skills such as assertiveness, empathy, and clear communication. The programs teach respect for diversity and a sense of responsibility for one’s own sexual health and well-being as well as that of others. And they encourage young people to grow freely in their understanding and enjoyment of sexuality. For many in the public health community, the European approach offers a gold standard for CSE that the rest of the world’s countries can model for successful outcomes.²³

CSE and the Future

What are successful outcomes toward which sexuality education should grow? Happiness and health for the young as they turn into adults, for starters. But the benefits are also catalytically global and long-term—and, as it happens, especially germane to an EarthEd curriculum. The future of world population and its social and environmental impacts depends largely on the behavior and

decisions that today's 2.5 billion children and teenagers will make. The families they form, the friendships they forge, the ways that they deal with cultural and gender differences, their health, and their overall well-being are critical for humanity and the Earth, now and for decades to come. The critical thinking skills that young people develop through sexuality education will enable them to make informed decisions about some of the most intimate aspects of their being: their bodies, their relationships, and their sexuality. And those skills will inform the decisions they make about everything else in their lives, including their environmental behavior, their political engagement, and their decisions about what they buy and consume and how they live.

How to teach about sexuality is a decision best made with the fullest participation of all stakeholders: educators, parents, and students themselves. Transparency in the development of CSE is essential, with availability of the details of the curricula available to anyone wishing to review them. Conversations with all parties, including opponents, can often dispel myths and misconceptions. It is unlikely that opposition will soon disappear in spite of such openness, however. That is best addressed through continued communication of the well-documented benefits—and, conversely, the lack of any evidence of harm to young people—of CSE and through skilled mobilization of public support for its presence at all levels of education, everywhere.

The best of the European programs point the way to success. In the Netherlands, rates of teen pregnancy, birth, abortion, and sexually transmitted disease are far lower than those in the United States and even most other European countries. It can hardly be coincidence that the country offers few barriers to access to contraceptive services and reproductive health care generally, and that it accepts the principle that encouraging healthy sexual development is an essential component of education. The country's course name for its CSE program in schools could well be a motto for the essence of sustainable human life in a challenged century, where conflict and intolerance are on the rise and environmental change threatens the long-term survival of civilization. Learners who internalize—along with their reading, writing, and arithmetic—*long live love* are likely to become the citizens that the rest of the twenty-first century desperately needs.²⁴

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Chapter 16. Suddenly More Than Academic: Higher Education for a Post-Growth World

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