Yes to Sexuality Education at School: Exploring the Voices of Italian Adolescents

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Abstract. Italy is one of the few European Union countries where the teaching of sexuality education is not included in the school curriculum, even if in the past forty years the issue has been quite discussed in the public arena. Through a qualitative research that took place with teenagers in three Italian regions, this paper aims at understanding what are their needs, views and perspectives about introducing sexuality education as a formal school subject. The voices of adolescents are indeed currently quite absent from the public discourse, even if this topic inherently concerns them. Findings reveal that the teenagers interviewed have a positive opinion on the teaching of sexuality education and that school seems the most appropriate space for it. Other spaces to talk about sexuality are lacking and whenever present they are embedded within a protective and preventive discourse. Furthermore, the research highlights strong gender categorization based on a heteronormative dominant narrative in the experiences of young people. These findings could provide an initial basis to develop a sexuality education curriculum starting from the adolescents’ opinions, preferences and lives.

Keywords: Sexuality Education, Italy, Adolescence, School

Introduction

Italy is one of the few countries of the European Union where sexuality education is not included as regular subject in the school curriculum (European Parliament, 2013, 22). The introduction of sexuality education in schools has been and still is a debated topic in the country. Over the past forty years, there have been various efforts to introduce it in the Italian curriculum, but none of them led to concrete steps forward in this direction (IPPF European

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Network, 2009, 58). Different bills have been independently proposed in the Parliament from representatives of various political parties, but none has been approved. Moreover, the opposition of the Catholic Church is constantly hindering the introduction of a sexuality education course in Italy (European Parliament, 2013, 22).

Before starting this research, we read through the most recent public debate around the possibility to introduce sex and/or sexuality education in Italian schools as a compulsory subject and we were triggered by the fact that the voices of children themselves are quite absent from the public arena, with some exceptions. We strongly believe children and adolescents have the right to express their opinions in all matters affecting them, as stated in article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Additionally, we aim at drawing on the experiences and knowledge of young people and bringing what is relevant and interesting to them regarding the introduction of sexuality education in Italian schools. For these reasons, we carried out a qualitative research and conducted focus group discussions with adolescents in three different regions of Italy to understand their views, needs and perspectives.

In conducting our research, we opted for the term “sexuality” instead of “sex”, because the former highlights a more holistic approach to the subject, not limited to the sphere of sexual reproductive health, but which includes various issues such as critical thinking, gender roles and stereotypes, relationships and emotions, different sexual orientations and identities, digital media literacy etc. (Barr et al., 2014, 398).

The paper starts with a description of the materials and methods used in the research. The next three sections discuss the findings that emerged from the analysis of the focus groups. The first section, “The interviewees’ views on school: between faith and criticism”, provides an insight on the adolescents’ perception of „school” and their needs with regards to education. The second section „Denied sexual subjects and protective discourse: unavailability of spaces to talk and learn about sexual matters”, presents the main discourse surrounding sexuality in different educational spaces available for adolescents. The third section „Reinforcing and resisting heteronormativity: a gender discursive mix”, looks at the theme of gender categorization and discrimination since it emerges prominently in our group discussions. To conclude, we summaries and discuss these findings in an attempt to bring our contribution to the debate.

**Methodology**

In the light of the above, we decided to conduct an exploratory study to gain some insights on the areas of interest and personal concerns regarding sexuality education in schools, emerging from discussions with groups of Italian adolescents; as well as grasping some characteristics of the cultural and social contexts behind their subjective views and experiences. The objective of this study is to prepare a solid ground for future and larger-scale research.

We chose a qualitative research approach based on the modified grounded theory developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990) with group discussions, to explore a broad range of ideas and perspectives and to „describe life worlds ‘from the inside out’, from the point of view of the people who participate” (Flick et al., 2004, 3). However, we are aware that it is a methodological impossibility to exactly represent the research participants as they intended (Flick et al., 2004), and this paper only attempts to re-represent their voices mediated by the researchers’ interpretation and analysis of the interviews.

We decided to conduct focus groups instead of individual interviews for multiple reasons. First, sexuality is an intimate topic and given the young age of the research participants we
thought that they would feel more comfortable in such settings. This is in line with Frith’s findings in her work on the use of focus groups in sex research, where she states that „focus groups provide conditions under which people feel comfortable discussing sexual experiences and which encourage people to talk about sex“ (Frith, 2000, 277). Moreover, focus groups are better at eliciting group-level meanings and processes (Bloor et al., 2001); at exploring more veiled attitudes, behaviours and social norms in the context of sexuality and sexuality education (Byers et al., 2003); and at understanding the language and the vocabulary used by respondents when they discuss sexuality and sexual experiences (Frith, 2000). To conclude, another important feature of focus groups is that corrections and confrontations in the group „concerning views that are not correct, not socially shared or extreme are available as means for validating statements and views“ (Flick, 2002, 114).

Three focus groups were conducted in three regions of Italy in December 2016: two in the northern part of the country, Veneto and Lombardy, and one in Apulia, in South-east Italy. Each focus group had four participants and the length of the discussions ranged between fifty and ninety minutes. Given our desire to explore the point of view of the participants and following the principles of theoretical sampling4, we chose a group of individuals for whom discussing sexuality education in school is relevant. Therefore, we interviewed young people below 19 years old, who were regularly attending high school. Two out of the three focus groups were composed of four girls, while the third was a mixed-group discussion between two female and two male participants. The average age of the participants in each group was 15 years old, with 14 being the minimum and 18 the maximum age. We decided to keep the groups with a small number of participants to ensure that every participant, regardless of their personalities or cognitive abilities, could feel free to express their views and actively participate in the discussion (Fraser, Fraser, 2000, 228).

While deciding how to recruit our study participants we were aware of the administrative barriers faced by researchers who wish to access public institutions for the youth, especially when interviewing young people on delicate and intimate themes such as those belonging to the sphere of sexuality (Allen et al., 2014; Jones, Biddlecom, 2011, 6). Therefore, we relied on personal contact with individuals within these institutions and followed what in technical terms is defined „convenience sampling“. We contacted teachers in high school settings and educators working in a residential child-care institution. The research was exhaustively explained to them and permissions to interview individuals in the institutions were granted. In one focus group, the young people interested in participating in the research were given the email address of the researcher and contacted her upon interest. In the other two focus groups, the teacher in the school and the educator in the child-care home recruited participants who wanted to participate in the research on a voluntary basis. A focus group was conducted in the researcher’s home, another at school during school hours and the last in the child-care home where the participants live. All the necessary steps to respect the ethical guidelines in researching with children were carefully followed5 and consent forms with detailed information about the research and the focus groups were signed by the study participants and their parents/guardians.

Semi-structured interviews guidelines were prepared to guide the discussions and allow for new themes to emerge6. They are composed of open-ended questions aiming at exploring a few main topics, by drawing on the previous experiences of the interviewees and their friends. The questions were developed to understand which themes and images adolescents recall under the umbrella of sexuality; to find out what spaces are available to discuss and learn about sexuality and whether the adolescents feel comfortable talking freely in these spaces; to let the interviewees imagine an ideal sexuality education class, an ideal sexuality
educator and an ideal place where sexuality education could be taught. The idea behind these themes of discussion comes back to our research approach and our belief that for sexuality education to be effective, its structure and content should be shaped on the basis of the ideas and needs of young people (Schalet et al., 2014).

Also, an ice breaker was developed with the intent to facilitate the emergence of topics for discussion and the beginning of the conversations with the teenagers. The ice breaker was constituted by twenty-two images that in our opinion were relevant for the theme of sexuality. The young people were invited to look at them and to choose some of them, if they wanted, to start discussing their thoughts and experiences.

**Analysis and results**

Following the grounded theory methodology of Corbin and Strauss (1990), we conducted data analysis with open coding. First, we carefully read the transcriptions of the focus groups and identified codes relevant to the research topic. This phase was conducted as a collective process to ensure that interpretation of the data was compared, and any discrepancy discussed, until researchers’ consensus on the codes was established. Some codes emerged as prevalent, those belonging to the same concepts were collated, and the interviews reorganized based on those. Then, groups of similar concepts were used to generate categories, to analyse certain phenomena of interest.

To support the analytical phase, we also looked at the interview notes that we collected during the group discussions, filled with information on the interviewees and observational data. The findings of our research are based on a theoretical conceptualization of the categories emerging from the coding process. However, given the small scale and exploratory nature of this research we could not achieve theoretical saturation in our grounded theory. This paper solely aims at reflecting on three main findings that emerged during our coding process:

1. School is the right space where to have sexuality education, but at the condition that it addresses the needs of the young people in their present lives. The adolescents we interviewed showed a sort of “faith” in schools, and agreed that sexuality education should be taught there. However, they criticise certain aspects of mainstream schooling and propose alternatives that would best suits their needs.

2. The little sexuality education received by the young people is embedded in a discourse confined to protection and prevention. Looking at schools and at all the other spaces currently available for teenagers to learn about sexuality (family, friends, media, community), a tension between the avoidance to recognise adolescents’ sexuality and the need to protect teenagers from the risks of sexuality is found: there is very limited space for discussion about sexuality between adolescents and their parents or teachers, and it tends to be focused on abstinence and contraception.

3. Gender categorization and heteronormativity were observed throughout the interviewees’ discussions, the language used and the experiences narrated by the adolescents. The participants mentioned several episodes of bullying and cyberbullying clearly related to gender discrimination and used a language that revealed a dominant discourse where heterosexuality is the norm. However, recognition of gender discrimination emerges from time to time.

The next three sections will discuss each of these phenomena and present our research findings in detail. Given that the interviews happened in Italian, a translation of the quotes
The interviewees’ views on school: between faith and criticism

Throughout all the three focus groups, some of the interviewees recount their experiences regarding the sexuality education they received, and all of the adolescents interviewed express their preferences and envisage an ideal sexuality education class.

The respondents seem not to have any doubt that sexuality education could be taught at school and express the need for a progressive sexuality education that would start from primary school and continue throughout high-school. Our interviewees think that the topics inherent to sexuality education should be divided according to the age of students, exactly as it happens for other subjects such as mathematics or history, and some of them say it should be compulsory. In fact, all the teenagers say that talking about sexuality from a younger age would help children getting accustomed to the subject and finding it less embarrassing to talk about it at an older age when they are directly involved with sexuality through their personal experiences.

It seems that school is the most appropriate space for Italian teenagers to learn sexuality education, not only because they do not reject this idea, but because a general feeling of „faith” towards school as an institution emerged from all the three focus groups. First of all, school is defined as a more comfortable space to talk about sexuality, in opposition to the context of the family. One of the boys describes schools as „the place in which to learn everything […] the place where one should learn how to live in society” (Martino, male, 15). School is also the context in which our interviewees see the possibility to learn how to achieve the knowledge that they could eventually impart to the future generation.

Furthermore, through the analysis of the interviews, we understand that the respondents conceive an effective education solely if formally taught by a teacher in frontal lessons, if graded and if compulsory. They think that if sexuality education would be a regular subject, included in the everyday school curriculum, it would be taken seriously by both teachers and students and ultimately have the potential of reaching its objectives. We read these opinions as a sort of „faith” in the formal Italian education system, in a school with defined teachers-students’ roles, rights and responsibilities. From our group discussions, we could almost argue that Italian teenagers believe in Italian school.

However, this does not mean they do not express room for improvement and desire for change within the same formal educational system that they trust. From the analysis of our interviews it emerges that, among those teenagers who attended a short sexuality education workshop autonomously organised by their schools, there is a general discontent with regards to the educators and their approach to the subject. Not only is embarrassment experienced by the interviewees, but also by the teachers who deal with the topic of sexuality in class.
Two of the girls, for example, talk about their past experience with external educators who went to their school for a sexuality workshop (Emma and Sabrina, females, 15). The two interviewees felt that the educators were afraid to talk about certain topics and they lacked the courage to name certain terms; they felt that the educators had taboos concerning sexuality.

In light of their previous experiences in terms of sexuality education, the interviewees express a clear idea about their ideal sexuality educator. Francesca, a girl of 15 years old, suggests that „the sexuality educator should be a young person, not a 60 years old teacher”. During previous sexuality workshops or during sexuality explained in biology classes, some of the interviewees felt a lack of professional competence coming from the teachers or educators, expressing that „it seemed the educators themselves had taboos and were afraid to talk to us about certain matters”, and „they did not have the courage to use some terms” (Emma, female, 15). A call for a sexuality educator external from the school context, came from all the three focus groups. Sabrina, 15 years old, says „No, not with a teacher. I would prefer an external person, who you have never seen before, and with whom you could open up more”. The ideal sexuality educator should then be younger than their average teachers, specialised in the subject, and also external to the school system. Some respondents also underlined that sexuality education is a private matter, and, for this reason, they wish to discuss it in smaller groups than their actual classes.

It seems that, with regards to sexuality education, our interviewees are calling for a school system much more open to external inputs and with teachers closer to the students’ lives. They think school is the right place to learn, but they feel school should change for sexuality education, classes should be made by less students, facilitating exchange of opinions and experiences.

We felt that in the adolescents’ words there was some kind of tension between trusting the formal education system with its frontal lessons and assumption that the learning child is a „tabula rasa” to be painted with concepts, and the need for an educational environment that pushes towards a major participation by the students and a growing inclusion of their experiences within the learning process. This tension is mirrored by the words of Emma (female, 15), who explicitly says that „it doesn’t make sense to go to school only to learn maths and Italian [...] they should also teach us to live outside school”. While Italian teenagers respect the school, and acknowledge it as the only effective environment for learning, they have the feeling of learning only something useful for their future and not for their present. From our group discussions, it emerged a call for a school system that looks at teenagers more as beings and not only as becomings.

Denied sexual subjects and protective discourse: unavailability of spaces to talk and learn about sexual matters

Across all focus groups, the array of spaces mentioned while discussing sources of information and conversations about sexuality included school, family (or community home), friends and the media. When analysing these spaces, it emerged that the young people perceive a taboo towards sexuality at different levels of society in Italy, and they do not find it easy to talk about sexual matters. Besides, the few experiences of sexuality education that they received in school workshops, in the family or through the media are limited to sexual health issues (prevention of early pregnancy and diseases, contraception, etc.) and do not include any other topic of discussion. Peers are the only ones with whom young people can openly talk and seek information. Community health services for young people, known in Italian
as Consultori⁹, were only briefly touched upon, and no other space in the community was mentioned.

From the analysis of our interviews it strongly emerges that both parents and educators try to avoid in-depth discussions about sexual matters and do not fully recognize sex as part of teens’ lives. Some of our interviewees’ reflections on sexuality education workshops in schools show difficulties by teachers and professionals to openly discuss sexuality with young people. While recalling their previous year’s sex education session, Sabrina and Emma talked about how the external sexuality educators were embarrassed of talking openly about sexuality. The girls used expressions like „It seem that they had taboos” (Emma, 15) or „They only made a frame of what it is but did not analyse everything” (Sabrina, 15). Martino, recalls an experience of sexuality education from middle school and was amused by how the educators spent a lot of time talking about the children’s favourite animals rather than focusing on more „concrete” issues.

Moreover, our interviewees discuss that they do not feel comfortable to talk to their parents about sexuality and sexual matters: „My mother introduced me the topic, though to talk to my mother about it does not seem appropriate. Okay, she is close to me, though I feel embarrassed” (Eva, female, 15). There may be multiple explanations for this embarrassment. If the adolescents would not perceive sexuality and sexual matters as taboos, they would feel more comfortable talking to their parents about it. Emma, 15 years old girl, says that „Above all in the house, it should not be such a taboo, if parents would talk about it, and would learn how to talk to their children, it would be easier for them and for us too”.

One of our interviewees acknowledged that parents do not know a lot about sexuality, and many of them externalized the importance of organizing sexuality education workshops for parents, guardians and teachers, so that they could learn and understand how to talk to their children.

The absence of formal sexuality education at school does not provide the opportunity for parents to approach children on sexuality issues, in a more impersonal way. Turnbull found that mothers would initiate conversations about sexual matters when their children were coming home from a sexuality education class (2012, 43). Furthermore, she found that communication regarding sexual topics was enhanced if the youth perceived their parents as knowledgeable (Turnbull, 2012, 41), and that lack in parental sexual knowledge was positively correlated to embarrassment felt by both parents and children in talking about sexual matters (Turnbull, 2012, 43).

A more complete explanation for the lack of parents-children confrontations on sexuality and for the embarrassment faced by teachers and sexuality education professionals in the school setting lies in the fact that young people are not recognized as „sexual beings”, but are rather constructed as „the asexual Romantic Child” (Harrison and Ollis, 2015, 324). Young people are themselves aware of the denial of their sexual subjectivity and actively argue that „it’s useless not to talk about it, pretend that this thing does not exist (.) that a sexual relationship is a sexual intercourse only after the marriage (.) it’s obvious that it is also a physical thing – I mean we have sexual intercourse at our age or a bit later, it’s useless to deny it” (Francesca, female, 15).

Allen argues that denying the sexual subjectivity of young people has negative implications on their sexual well-being as it divests them from their agency to act and protect themselves from negative experiences (Allen, 2007, 222). The young people in our focus groups are aware of not being sexual innocents, yet they avoid any discussion with adults that may picture them as sexualized. Therefore, they only end up discussing with adults when they have a serious problem, such as having an unwanted pregnancy or being abused, but not before the problem emerges. Emma, a 15 years old girl, narrated an experience of when she
was 11 and she was texting with a 30 years old man. She mentioned that the fear of being negatively judged by her family was the main reason why she did not immediately denounce the situation to her parents. She discussed that if the family would have understood that even being 11 years old she could be interested in sex and relationships, it would have been easier for her to talk to her parents about her fears and doubts at an earlier stage.

Analysing our interviews, we also found that the few instances in which parents discuss sexuality with their children, or schools incorporate sexuality education workshops or teaching, are embedded in a protective discourse. Interviewing many young people in New Zealand, Allen develops the concept of „protective discourse in sexuality education”. She realizes that sexual activity is considered inherently as a risky business and young people endangered by the negative consequences associated with it. Therefore, sexuality education curricula are designed to protect the young people solely through abstinence and prevention, and do not touch any other themes (Allen, 2007, 225).

In none of our focus groups the interviewees mentioned or discussed experiences of comprehensive sexuality education including different sexual preferences, gender, relationships or other topics. The young Italians discussed how the little sexuality education received in school was limited to sexually transmittable diseases and contraception and did not go beyond these themes: „I remember that in middle school I studied the reproductive apparatus, at the biology level: organs, diseases, like transmittable diseases, we talked about HIV, of yeast infection, though nothing more than that” (Daniela, female, 15).

The same emerged when the interviewees were reflecting on the little sexuality education received in the family context. One female interviewee narrated a story of her mother giving a booklet with information about prevention to her sister and a male interviewee recalled his grandmother giving him some condoms as a gift.

In the absence of other spaces, and when wanting some information beyond the use of contraception and sexually transmittable diseases, the adolescents sought information and conversations about sexuality from their friends and the media.

„Everything that I discovered, it didn’t come from my parents nor from school, it was thanks to my friends” (Emma, female, 15). Friends are those with whom to discuss sexual matters and talk about problems, fears and exchange personal experiences; and they can open doors on otherwise undiscussed topics, such as homosexuality and different sexual orientations. Though, peer groups can also reinforce heteronormative views and gender roles. In next section, we will in-depth discuss instances in which this happens.

Internet also emerged as a tool to self-educate, together with friends or alone, to fill the knowledge gap on sexual matters. However, our interviewees consider Internet an unreliable source of information, since different websites provide contradicting data. Also, Internet poses risks to be exposed to unwanted pornographic content while seeking for information on sexual matters. These results are in line with a large survey carried out with Italian teenagers by the National Observatory for Adolescence (Osservatorio Nazionale Adolescenza, 2016) and other qualitative research on Internet and sexuality education (Jones, Biddlecom, 2011, 14-16).

Television emerges as another important source of information, and as a trigger to discuss sexual matters with friends and in family contexts. The interviewees mentioned different TV programmes and movies, on HIV/AIDS, early pregnancies, contraception and relationships produced either in Italy, in Germany or in the USA. Even though one interviewee mentioned a mainstream television program that talked about a homosexual love relationship, it seems that in traditional mass media the focal point of the discussion is embedded in a protective discourse too. Moreover, all the TV shows or movies mentioned by our interviewees were not produced with an educational purpose. Leaving the adolescents alone with the values and messages passed by those programmes, without creating spaces to re-discuss and
challenge them can be problematic. As Kulik argues, sexism and sexual objectification of women in the media can be potentially dangerous for adolescents if they are not mediated by formative discussions on sexuality in other spaces (2015, 988). The introduction of comprehensive sexuality education in schools, would provide spaces for discussion on sexual matters and provide instruments to deconstruct sexual identities and become more sensitive to media misrepresentation (Kulik, 2015).

**Reinforcing and resisting heteronormativity: a gender discursive mix**

Our interviewees talk about their experiences and those of their friends, they express opinions and ideas on a variety of subjects. From their arguments, but also their behaviour and their language, we could not help noticing that a certain heteronormativity was laying behind the scenes. Their thoughts and their social life are organised through “desires, sexual practices and identities [that] are universally heterosexual” (Warner, 1993, xxi–xxv).

Not only sex between a boy and a girl is the first thing that comes to their mind when thinking about sexuality, but the gender roles that boys and girls embody seem to be quite defined in our interviewees’ conversations.

The girls especially show awareness about the risk of being labelled because of their sexual behaviour and pay attention not to be deemed as “easy” (Daniela, female, 15), pushing it to judging who has a more promiscuous behaviour than their own or posts sexy pictures on social networks. The importance of keeping sex a private act and everything related to it as something behind-the-scenes and between two people and two people only is often underlined.

This kind of discourse, where women are being criticised for being sexual and automatically limit themselves in their sexual behaviour, while men seem not to have to be careful in expressing their sexuality, often leads girls to feel more negatively about sex than boys (Carlson, 2012) and characterises what Allen defines as “operation of the sexual double standard” (Allen, 2003, 221).

Sex and the expression of sexuality become then a complex issue for girls, who reveal some anxiety in having intercourse for the first time, with further struggle in negotiating for the use of contraception. The necessity of girls to be reassured when showing their sexuality and avoiding taking initiative in this realm is a phenomenon that plays within a larger discourse of heteronormativity (Allen, 2003, 220), where girls are depicted as more in need to affection and emotions, while boys construct their masculinity cutting away their feelings and concentrating on sex as a physical act (Duncombe, Marsden, 1993).

Within the display of such clear gender roles and rules, reinforced openly also by the educators, it is not surprising that female sexual pleasure is perceived in a positive connotation only when it takes place within an official relationship, while other supposedly pleasurable activities, like masturbation and watching porn, are defined by some of the girls as “disgusting” activities performed exclusively by men. As Allen clearly explains, “[... ] the construction of women and men’s sexuality is dichotomized, with women lacking erotic desire, voyeuristic tendencies and corporeal pleasure, while men are disconnected from their emotional and mental needs and desires” (Allen, 2003, 218).

The male-female dichotomy reflects itself also in the way some of the interviewees would like sexuality education to be taught, with same-sex educators, assuming that „sex talks” would be heterosexual in their essence. Gender dichotomy and heteronormativity also emerge from some of the interviewees’ terminology when assessing their own heterosexual preferences.
as „normal”, and sometimes they give rise to unfortunate discriminatory comments towards homosexuals, even if veiled and unarticulated.

The fact that many of our interviewees expressed such gender categorisation in the focus groups did not surprise us, since we all learn and understand gender through a process of socialisation (Connell, 1987), and the society we live in is dominated by heterosexual identity and discourse practices historically validated by religion, law, media, medicine, and academia too (Hawkes, 1996). What instead was an unexpected finding of our research is the fact that machismo, understood as a phenomenon when men and women have a clear and distinct perception of their gender roles and shape their behaviour to reinforce them consequently (Sequeira, 2009), constitutes the backstage of all the experiences of bullying our interviewees tell us about.

Bullying at school means first of all that girls are called names and it is very difficult for them to stand against it and denounce it. Furthermore, the episodes of cyberbullying the interviewees tell us about are numerous, including cases that happened to people very close to them or in their circle of friends and acquaintances. In all these episodes, the bullied one is always a girl, in relation to her sexual behaviour.

Cyber-slut-shaming, namely the stigmatisation of a girl through digital media for engaging in behaviour judged to be promiscuous or sexually provocative, seems to be quite common and our interviewees were keen to talk about it. In particular, during the discussion of the mixed group, one girl told the two boys with no frills that it is especially the boys’ fault who share pictures and encourage sexualized behaviours by girls, while at the same time judging and labelling them.

If bullying and unacceptance of others derive from a society where some categories of people are favoured over others (Harrison, Ollis, 2015, 325), from this research it emerges that our interviewees’ bullying experiences derive from a society that favours the heterosexual male, „where men as a group dominate women as a group, both structurally and ideologically” (Grose et al., 2014, 742-743). Our interviewees’ experiences of bullying stem in a patriarchal society (Connell, 1987); however, the teenagers do not seem to recognise it beyond a point.

Having said that, it is important also to underline that the analysis of the focus groups did not bring up exclusively naiveté regarding gender discrimination. Some of the interviewees had a proper exchange of opinions about the rights of homosexuals and the tension between conservative and more progressive discourses is evident. Some of the teenagers also correct the others when the terminology they use with regards to homosexuality is discriminatory or heteronormative. However, there is always the need to state that „I am not against gay people, I love them” (Mara, female, 15) or „I am in favour of gay people” (Laura, female, 15). Statements that within many contexts are obvious and do not need to be explicit are perceived as necessary by our interviewees, probably mirroring a social context where the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) community is still affirming its political rights. Furthermore, when homosexuality emerges as a topic in the focus groups, it is not accompanied by any understanding of gender preferences as fluid, but the experience of gender diversity is framed within the two categories of „gay” and „lesbian”, with no mentioning of bisexuality, nonetheless sensing any variety of identities possible within a queer gender spectrum.

As Hekman points out, „even though in every era there will be hegemonic discourses, other non-hegemonic discourses will also exist, forming a discursive mix from which subjectivity can be constructed” (1995, 203). This „discursive mix” is crystal clear in our interviewees’ words, where the heteronormative discourse is sometimes interrupted and fought against. Not only more progressive positions toward homosexuality are visible, but also awareness and stands against women’s discrimination.
For example, some of the girls stick together and react to boys labelling or bullying them or ask themselves if boys are not probably scared of sex too, reacting to the assumption that males are always ready for intercourse while girls reflect more on their emotions and feelings (Allen, 2003, 231).

What we read as a sort of resistance to a heteronormative discourse by our interviewees (Allen, 2003, 216) also came from their open negative judgement of their parents, their educators, or adults in general in circumstances where they demonstrate intolerance towards homosexuals. One of the girls was quite explicit in underlining that knowledge about gender diversity and awareness of discrimination towards women and homosexuals should be paramount qualities for a good sexuality educator.

**Discussion and conclusions**

Our analysis of the group discussions leads us to think that the teenagers have a positive opinion on learning sexuality education at school and school seems the most appropriate space to teach sexuality education. Our interviewees show indeed a sort of faith in the school system. They perceive school as a space that belongs to them and they think that what is taught at school in a formal way, with grades and through a frontal lesson, is generally taken seriously by the students.

Furthermore, from our analysis it emerged quite clearly that there is lack of communication with parents and families when it comes to the sexuality sphere. Also, other community spaces, such as consultori,13 religious communities, sport centres, etc., are almost non-existent in the words of the teenagers interviewed and the only sources of sexuality-related information mentioned are media and friends, in a rather problematic way.

For the above-mentioned reasons, even if we are aware that curricular interventions cannot alone solve risk-promoting behaviours that are embedded in social reality (Pettifor et al., 2011), through our analysis we can affirm that, at the moment, school seems to be the only available and most suitable space for adolescents to learn and discuss about sexuality. Therefore, sexuality education should be included in the school curriculum.

This inclusion should however be accompanied by a critical approach towards the education system as it is now conceived in Italy. Our interviewees do not perceive school as a perfect space; they call for younger teachers, for external educators, for small learning groups. They especially express the need to be put at the centre of the learning process as agents, as people with their own set of experiences that can be useful within the learning process itself. They criticise a school system that engages with them exclusively as humans in development, which will one day be somebody, rather than also considering their present needs, problems, wishes and capacities.

The teenagers we interviewed are already engaging with their own problems and curiosities. They look for information about sexuality in the media, they talk among themselves, and they recognise behaviors of their peers, educators and parents that bring discomfort in their lives. They already engage with the sphere of sexuality, therefore sexuality education within the school environment should be taught taking into account that adolescents do not simply need to be equipped with instruments useful for their future development, but that they should be given the possibility to actively engage with the curriculum, bringing in their own, also sexuality-related, experiences.

The group discussions highlighted how parents and educators seem to overlook at the teenagers’ sexuality-related experiences and this is not surprising, since our western society is driven by the assumption that children and sexuality are a non-existent, if not aberrant,
binomial, being childhood perceived as a life stage characterised by innocence (Woodhead, Montgomery, 2003, 236-246). Our society historically recognised the sexuality of teenagers, in a way that does not value their agency though (Woodhead, Montgomery, 2003). Indeed, our research underlines a sexuality discourse in the interviewees’ lives that worries about protecting them from sexually transmittable diseases and early pregnancies much more than enabling them having positive sexual experiences. This predominant protective discourse around adolescent sexuality emerges overwhelmingly from the narrations of our interviewees and it does not seem to fulfill their needs in an extensive manner. If a sexuality education curriculum should be constructed upon those needs, it should include much more than sex health topics focusing on prevention.

In particular, we noted from the analysis of the group discussions, that strong gender categorization based on a heteronormative dominant discourse constitutes the backbone of many experiences of bullying and cyberbullying that seem to be quite spread in the teenagers’ communities and peer-groups. Our interviewees show some resistance towards gender discrimination but it seems that they are not well-equipped with the knowledge that could enable them to really stand against it with enough awareness. Sometimes they would like to express some criticism towards other people’s behaviour or words, but they cannot really transform into a rational argument what is born from a feeling of discomfort towards something they emotionally perceive as wrong. They lack the language of a gender discourse that is not heteronormative and they seem not to have many examples in their social environment of educators who instead are more conscious about gender dynamics. With these findings in mind, we argue that a sexuality education curriculum that responds to the voices and needs of teenagers in Italy should not overlook gender-role stereotypes and sexual scripts, especially since their formation occurs exactly during adolescence (Martin, 1996).

“In order to be effective, sexuality education would therefore have to focus on changing peer norms around the accepted ‘macho’ behaviour of boys and the passivity of girls” (Wood, Rolleri, 2014, 528). To do so, a sexuality education curriculum cannot limit itself to themes related to sexual health, but it should engage the learners with topics such as erotic and sexual pleasure, since their discussion in a school environment helps combating phenomena and behaviours that ultimately lead to heteronormativity (Allen, 2004, 163). Sexuality education programmes that tackle traditional gender roles would in turn also facilitate the prevention of unhealthy sexual behaviours, since social factors are empirically linked to negative sexual health outcomes (Sanchez, Crocker, Boike, 2005; Pleck et al., 1993).

Furthermore, we highlight the tension between behaviours and opinions belonging to a discourse where heterosexuality is the norm and attempts by our interviewees to resist that discourse, even if with difficulties and with lack of assisting knowledge. This leads us to think that, if a sexuality education curriculum must be built on the needs and opinions of adolescents themselves, it should provide them with the instruments to boost that resisting potential and be able to be actors of change.

Sexuality education could be either taught in a way that reinforces gender stereotypes as normal, indeed reinforcing the root causes of the experiences of psychological violence and bullying that our interviewees brought up in their discussions, or it could be „the practice of freedom”, where students critically react and participate to the transformation of their socio-cultural context (Shaull, 2005, 14; Tolman, 2006) adopting alternative gender ideologies. The school system is indeed a two-edged sword. It can, on one side, easily be a strong instrument of inclusion of children and adolescents into the logic of the current system, bringing, in this specific case, conformity to heteronormative gender models (Shaull, 2005). But, on the other side, school can be also the place where teenagers engage in a critical way with their social environment (Shaull, 2005), reinventing it creatively, and hence reflecting on their experiences of bullying and tackling their root-causes.
Additionally, the group discussions lead quite clearly to a connection between the media world and the world of sexuality of the teenagers interviewed. This is not only evident through the binomial bullying-gender discrimination but also by the fact that Internet and TV constitute the only source of sexuality-related information adolescents seem to have, apart from their peers. This is an interesting and disturbing finding, considering that the gender discourse in the media is dominated by sexism, sexual objectification of women and reinforcement of heteronormativity and traditional gender-roles (Kulik, 2015, 988), all phenomena at the basis of the discomforting experiences of our interviewees.

We cannot help but agreeing with Kulik when she states that “censorship of our sexual education system is not aligned with our comfort with sexualizing women in the media whatsoever” (Kulik, 2015, 986-988) and think this gap between school teachings and media content is almost ironic for a society like the Italian one, so obsessed with sexualised media (Attimonelli, Susca, 2016, 101-121).

We think that, both as Italian researchers and practitioners, the way forward to improving adolescents’ wellbeing, following and interpreting their thoughts, would be to advocate for an educational curriculum that fills the above-mentioned gaps, e.g. a queer sexuality education curriculum14 (Drazenovich, 2011).

To conclude, a progressive development could be constituted by the creation of new media content and instruments that could contribute to and enlarge the discourse resisting sexism and machismo in TV and the Internet, but especially fill the current sexuality educational vacuum present in formal and informal educational spaces that Italian teenagers experience.

It could be argued that the sample size of our research is small and that our results are only limited. Fraser and Fraser show that between three and five group discussions allow for enough diversity of views towards theoretical saturation (Fraser, Fraser, 2000, 228). However, due to time and resource limitation in our research we did not treat data collection and analysis as interrelated processes: the sample was not generated as a theoretical sample, with the analysis of previous group discussions informing where to draw the next round of participants. Therefore, to increase the robustness of our results, a second round of focus group discussions in different social contexts in Italy should be carried out. Other groups of adolescents may include additional perspectives and provide new themes for discussion. This was brought up by our interviewees themselves. They mentioned that young people living in very religious families or with more conservative views may have different opinions regarding whether having sexuality education in school and how to organize a sexuality education class. Including these young people in the group discussions may add nuances to at least some of our results, since it might be that their needs or perspectives on the subject differ from those of our current sample and new categories might emerge as prominent in a sexuality-related discussion. Also, our group discussions were characterised by gender imbalance, with ten girls and two boys interviewed. Including more male participants and conducting at least one focus group with all-males could give additional insights, especially regarding our findings on gender roles and heteronormativity.

We hope to conduct additional research with participants with various gender identities and belonging to different social contexts to provide more comprehensive future recommendations. Indeed this research is a first attempt to include the thoughts, perspectives and opinions of a sample of Italian adolescents in their complexity and to analyse the needs emerging from their voices.
Annexe A – Interview Guidelines

1. What do you associate with the word sexuality?
   a. Now I am going to show you some images that I think are all related to the theme “sexuality”. Choose a few so we can start our chat using them.
   b. What do you see in this image and what made you choose it?
   c. Could you tell me a story in your life or in the life of people close to you that is connected to what we are discussing about?
   d. Among these images, are there any that give you an idea of uncomfortably? Can you elaborate on them?

2. If a friend comes to you with a question about sex or sexuality, how would you help him or her?
   a. Can you give me an example from your personal experience where this happened?
   b. Do you know if in your city are there spaces where young people can get information related to sexuality, sex and relationships? How do you and people you know use them?
   c. What comes in your mind if I say Internet and sexuality?
   d. Think about yourself now, being X years old. Then think about yourself 2 years ago. What are the things you learnt about sexuality in the last two years? And how? Please tell me about them.
   e. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you had wrong information about something and you thought “Damn, I wish I did it differently!”? Could you explain me the situation?

3. Have you ever had sexuality education classes?
   If yes:
   a. When did you have them? Could you please describe them?
   b. Can you recall any particular uncomfortable situations during your sexuality education classes? Please tell me more about them.
   c. How, if at all, has your view of sexuality changed?
   d. What positive changes have occurred in your life since you had sexuality education classes?
   If no:
   a. Have you ever thought about it?
   b. Have you ever felt the need of having a structured sexuality education?
   c. Do you know anybody who had sexuality education? Tell me about it.
   In both cases:
   a. Which suggestions and ideas would give to a sexuality educator?
   b. Which themes do you think it would be important to include in a sexuality education workshop?
   c. What about sex and digital media? (including, but not limited to the Internet, mobile phones, or games)
   d. How would your ideal sexuality educator be?
   e. How knowledgeable do you think adults around you (professors, parents, relatives, etc.) are about sexuality and sex? Do you have any recommendation for them?

4. Many people say that sexuality education should be mandatory in school. What do you think about it?
Annexe B – Ice Breaker

Notes

1. It is necessary to stress the fact that in Italy not only there is not any compulsory sexuality education in schools nor any legal framework of it, but there is not any compulsory sex, sexual health or emotional education either. As of 2017, each individual school board can decide whether to introduce a brief sexuality education workshop provided by external organisations,
or to deliver a few biology classes about reproductive organs with some information regarding pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases’ prevention.

2. Donati et al. (2000) conducted an impact evaluation of an experimental programme in sex education for secondary school students in Rome. In 2014, the Provincial Health Department of Palermo, in partnership with a NGO, carried on sexual health education workshops and made a survey to analyse the opinion of the students with regards to the project (ASP Palermo e AMS Onlus (2014). More recently, in 2016, the National Observatory for Adolescence reported as results of a survey that 79% of the adolescents interviewed „declares that it would be important having sex education classes at school” (Osservatorio Nazionale Adolescenza, 2016).

3. „Discourses are social, political and cultural arrangements of ideas and concepts through which the world as we know it is communicated and constructed; they are observed in terms of the elements of knowledge within them and the power they exert on human behaviour. Discourse is about the production of language and practices by particular systems that produce existential meanings that then shape our individual lives.” (Drazenovich, 2011, 378).

4. The sampling strategy of theoretical sampling, first formulated by Glaser and Strauss (1967), follows the basic principle of selecting research’s subjects per the contributions and new insights they can give to answer the research questions and develop the theory.

5. The guidelines of Alderson and Morrow (2004) were used to carefully follow ethical procedures when consulting and doing research with children.

6. See Annex A.

7. For example, one of the images was a picture of Tiziana Cantone, an Italian young lady that committed suicide in 2016 after being victim of revenge porn and cyberbullying. Given the attention that this episode received in the Italian mass media, we wanted to understand whether the adolescents were informed about it, and what they thought about the situation. Other images showed a commercial pack of condoms, two lovers in front of the sunset, a homosexual kiss, a sexuality education class with young children, etc. All of the images are attached as Annex B.

8. Only two thirds of adolescents in our sample have had an experience of sexuality education in school, in the form of a workshop or as part of a biology class, and never as a subject formally included in the school curriculum. The others never received any sexuality education in school.

9. The consultori familiari are particular health clinics that have been constituted in the whole Italian territory since 1975 with the aim of supporting individuals or families regarding all issues related to sexual health but also legal procedures with regards to adoption, foster-care and medically assisted procreation.

10. The interviewees mentioned two movies and two TV programmes: „Unfriended”, produced by Blumhouse (USA) in 2014; „Bibi & Tina” produced by Kiddinx Entertainment, Boje Buck Produktion and DCM Productions in Germany in 2014; „16 years old pregnant”, a format produced firstly by Morgan J. Freeman in the USA in 2009 and then produced also in an Italian version and mainstreamed by MTV; and „Uomini e Donne” (“Men and Women”) a TV programme invented and produced in Italy and mainstreamed by Mediaset TV channels from 1996.

11. „Uomini e Donne” is a TV programme that traditionally shows relationships between men and women. In season 2016-2017 it also includes homosexual relationships.

12. „Queer” is not an identity per se, „it is an analytic and political process aimed at subverting and potentially eliminating dichotomous sexual and gender constructs” (Schriver, 2011, 267)

13. See definition of „consultori” above in footnote 10.

14. The protective and preventive discourse that characterises the little sexuality education that our interviewees received is indeed a reflection of an approach to sexuality and sexual identity as „something that medicine, psychiatry or schools needs to govern by way of the development of discursive practices” (Drazenovich, 2011, 379). Queer theory instead interprets human sexuality subverting dominant discourses and engaging with it not as a biological fact but as a social and cultural concept. A queer approach to sexuality education understands that teenagers are not born as fixed sexual beings but they are learning to become them by acting cultural roles and scripts (Drazenovich, 2011). Consequently, a queer sexuality education curriculum seems appropriate per se in valuing adolescents’ experiences. Furthermore, thanks to a focus on
subjectivity, plurality and differences, a queer approach to the theme of sexuality, being drawn by post-structuralism (Drazenovich, 2011), could provide students with the tools to sharpen their analytical thinking and reimagine, create and shape their identities and gender roles according to their needs and the causes of their potential or actual problems.

References


