

An ecological approach to sex-ed evaluation research

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Looking at the literature...

- Dominated by focus on individual behaviour change, notably of HIV risk behaviours (delay debut, condom use). Assumption of individual choice and control as the key site of risk minimisation.
- Dominated by biomedically inspired methods. RCT is golden standard, but many methodological problems. Pedagogical perspective almost absent.
- Health effects found for individual students are not as impressive as might have been expected

What does that evidence tell us?

- Possible positive effects on sex/health related knowledge, attitudes, communication, skills
- Only modest effects, if at all, generally shown for sexual behaviours and certainly protective behaviours
- Hardly any effects on biomarkers such as prevalence of STIs/HIV and teenage or unplanned pregnancies
- Effects mostly disappear when assessed long term
- Effects mostly moderately strong, often surprisingly weak

What does it NOT tell us?

- How to explain the (lack of) effectiveness?
- Effects on gender equality? Beyond-health indicators? Human rights outcomes?
- Content elements most effective?
- Effects on classes, schools, communities?
- How to strengthen school systems/teaching methods?
- How to improve implementation processes?
- Promotion of participation, ownership, relevance?
- How to translate findings into policy? How to improve access, address vulnerabilities, fight exclusion?

Some effects hardly ever measured

- Self-esteem, awareness, acceptance, confidence
 - “Now I have confidence! I used to be shy and was afraid to speak out in class, but not anymore.”(Ethiopia, Sena, f, 15)
- Feeling of direction in life
 - “Having a dream is like seeing light in the dark. It helps you to have a goal in life.” (Ethiopia, Natty, m, 17)
- Young people’s advocacy ambitions and skills
 - WAYAN, the WSWM Alumni Youth Advocacy Network (Kenya)
 - “We can’t discriminate against people living with HIV! I want to liberate people from that stigma.” (Ethiopia, Tizita, f, 15)
- Uneven impact & negative effects, e.g. on girls, lgbti

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Recommendation 1: Employ a wide range of outcome indicators



- Beyond health
- Beyond individual
- Gender equity and human rights indicators
- Understand heterogeneity among young people!

Much depends on content

- Underlying notions of youths' sexual rights
- Matching youths' needs and realities; goals beyond pregnancy and STI's/HIV/AIDS
- Addressing gender norms, sexual orientation, sexual expression and pleasure, sexual violence, ethics, structural inequities
- Integration of essential but difficult aspects, e.g. gender transformative aims, practicing skills
- Teacher vs peer led, direct access, virtual venues

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And even more on delivery!

- Overall program fidelity
 - Adherence to an intervention
 - Exposure or dose
 - Quality of delivery
 - Participant's responsiveness
- Two elements are crucial:
 - Teacher/facilitator knowledge, attitudes, skills, comfort re. youth, gender and sexuality issues
 - Participatory teaching strategies

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 - Adherence to an intervention
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 - Programme differentiation
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HARDLY EVER MEASURED

Context is crucial

- Educational environment, physical, psychosocial, organisational
 - e.g. safe school environment, student-teacher/student-student relationships, funding, class size, teacher availability, school policies, support and leadership
- Access to high quality (YF) services & supplies
- Normative, cultural and political environment
 - e.g. community norms and traditions, media exposure, region/state characteristics
- Structural inequities among students

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Recommendation 2: Study a range of confounding factors



- Content specificities
- Delivery specificities
- School climate
- Access to information, services, supplies
- Enabling normative, cultural, political environment
- Structural inequities

Some urgent questions

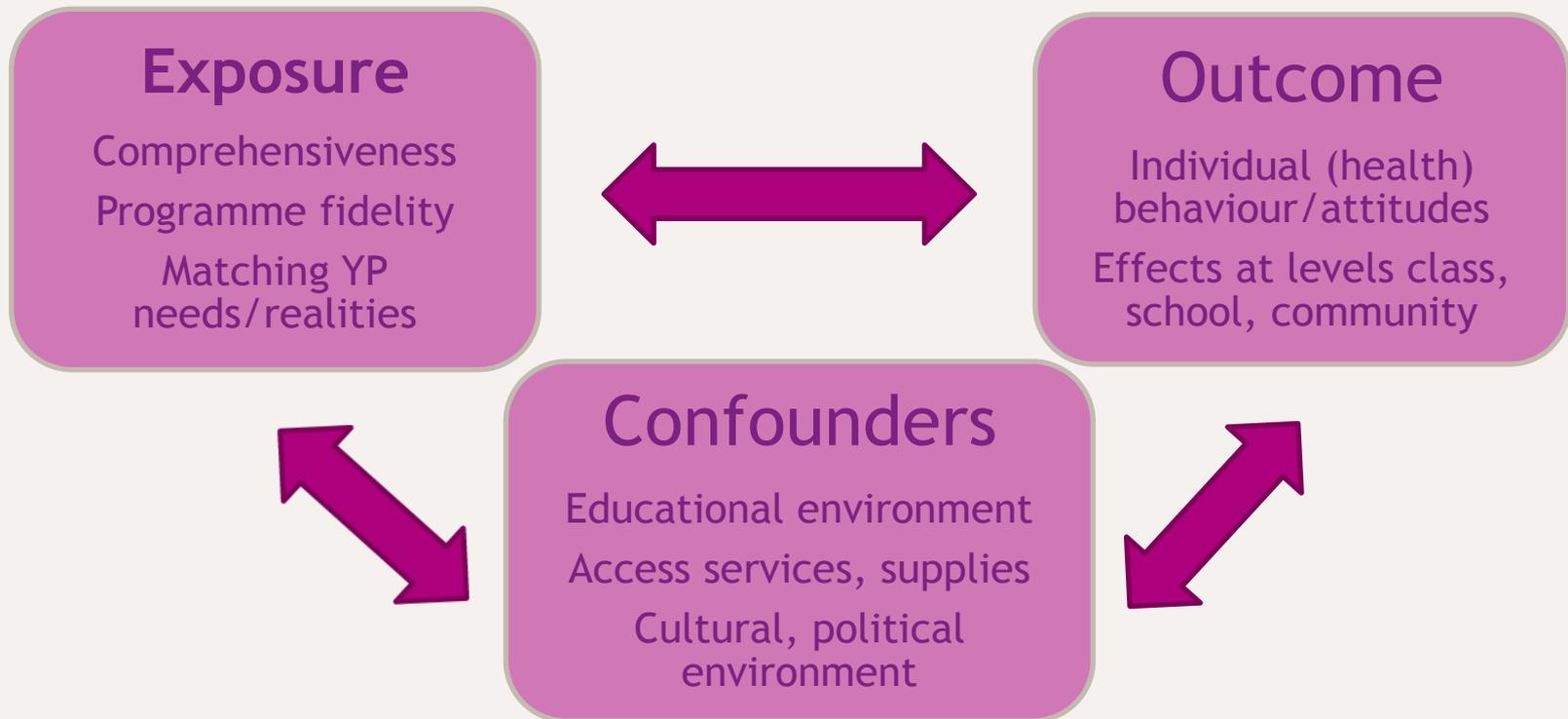
- How to improve teacher attitudes and participatory teaching skills? ➡ Study effects of teacher training!
- How to improve implementation processes? ➡ Evaluate them and investigate how to best affect noted barriers and enablers!
- What works best when and why? ➡ Realist evaluation!
- Effect on classes, schools, communities? ➡ Study them!
- Enhancing ownership? ➡ Participatory research!

Recommendation 3: Employ multiple questions and methods



- From ‘whether’ to ‘when, for whom and how’ of sex-ed success
- Move away from focus on individual level
- Couple impact studies with implementation science: e.g. ‘realist evaluation’
- Prioritise confounders reform!

An ecological approach to sex-ed evaluation research



So, WHY an ecological approach?

- To understand why and when and where sex-ed works
- To know the barriers to tackle & enablers to strengthen
- Provide for a better link between research results and policy development (at school, local, national levels)
- To develop tools to scrutinize decision/policy makers and hold them accountable
- Engage communities and inform community action
- Ensure meaningful youth participation
- Support ownership and improve sustainability

Either way...

- Individual impact evaluations should be ecological

Or..

- Individual impact evaluations should be avoided until we have targeted and improved content, access, delivery, implementation, (disabling) mechanisms and contexts...

Thank you for your attention!