Understanding what is ‘Comprehensive’ in/about (?) Comprehensive Sexuality Education

A Literature Review

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Introduction

In recent years, the notion of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) has increasingly gained traction within the international community. CSE is regarded as an important means to inform young people about their rights and sexual health, as well as improving public health outcomes and contributing to sustainable development. However, there is much that remains unknown about CSE and considerable variations exists in understanding what makes a programme or policy ‘comprehensive’. Across literature on the topic it is apparent that the onus of CSE is focused on equipping young people with age-appropriate information and education about sexuality and relationships, rights and agency, and access to high-quality services (IPFF 2016; UNESCO 2016). Authors working across various themes within the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for young people note that CSE must be inclusive of youth identities and non-stigmatising, ensuring the needs and rights of all young people (UNESCO 2015; International Disability Alliance and Center for Reproductive Rights; Pingel et al 2013). Yet, while these goals are at the core of CSE, the intended breadth and depth of this type of sexuality education creates discussion in distinguishing the specific approaches, content, and variations in programmes in different locations and at different levels.

In reviewing a range of literature sources on Comprehensive Sexuality Education – including briefs, policy documents and programme reports – it was noted that, in addition to ambiguity around a specific definition of CSE, there is little critical analysis of the approach itself. Many reports discuss the efficacy of programme and policy implementation, but analysis of the theory underpinning CSE is limited across literature on the topic. Some aspects of CSE can also present significant challenges in creating truly ‘comprehensive’ programmes and policies. This review aims to establish what are the core components and main definitions attributed to Comprehensive Sexuality Education, and how these components and definitions can impact implementation within different contexts and at different levels. This document sets out several key findings resulting from the review of literature on CSE, which will be discussed throughout the document:

1. **Broad, but misses the mark.** Throughout the literature, CSE is described as being broad, covering a range of topics with the aim of ensuring young people are informed and can make effective decisions. However, in its bid to be holistic, the abstract nature of CSE, combined with a lack of a solid definition of this approach, means that CSE can be perceived as being broad but without any specific direction or ideology.

2. **Comprehensive does not equal inclusive.** Although it is regularly cited across literature that CSE should be an inclusive and representative approach, there are many identities and experiences of young people which are neglected within documents and briefs – particularly LGBT+ youth, those who do not fall along culturally dominant heterosexual lines and young people living in conflict. If we understand normative theory to be the accepted standard for the creation and evaluation of CSE programmes (Nwake 2013), where this form of sexuality education does not address the experiences and needs of all young people within a context, CSE cannot purport to be fully ‘comprehensive’.

3. **Can work against itself.** Despite there being no clear definition of CSE and the opportunity for somewhat flexible content of programmes and policies as a result of this, the notion of ‘Comprehensive Sexuality Education’ is often opposed in many contexts on socio-cultural or religious grounds. This can result in difficulties in implementing programmes or policies being ‘hijacked’ to compromise the inclusive and ‘comprehensive’ goals of CSE. Emphasis has been placed on the need to develop CSE with socio-cultural sensitivities in mind in order to ensure efficiency and co-operation.

4. **Guidance remains top-down – for now.** At present, much guidance on CSE as an approach comes from multi-lateral agencies and international organisations, which contributes to the concept’s abstract nature. While guidance is still predominantly ‘top-down’, the growing number
of programme reports, reviews and shared learning resulting from CSE programmes can support a circular system of guidance, which includes feedback from local and national levels.

Structure of the review

Each of these findings listed above are linked, highlighting some of gaps and opportunities present within Comprehensive Sexuality Education as an approach. This review will discuss and critique literature on Comprehensive Sexuality Education and is divided in to the following sections:

Part 1 will discuss the core components of CSE and their inclusion in literature on the topic. This section sets out the key components which underpin CSE in order to establish CSE as an approach to sexuality education.

Part 2 will further discuss the range of definitions attributed to Comprehensive Sexuality Education, including its comparison to and synonymic use with other prominent forms of sexuality education.

Part 3 analyses the presence of CSE at international, national and local levels and makes reference to the benefits and limitations of this approach in practice.

Finally, Part 4 will make recommendations on developing Comprehensive Sexuality Education as an approach and how this can support with improving the implementation and efficacy of programmes and policies.

Methodology

As the aim of this review is to understand what the core components and definitions attributed to CSE are, and how this affects the way in which CSE programmes and policies are developed and implemented across a range levels. Therefore, the first step of the methodology was to establish search terms which would be used to locate and review relevant literature. Key search terms linked to the main research question included key phrases such as ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’, ‘sexual and reproductive health’, ‘relationships’, ‘pleasure’, ‘participation’, ‘agency’ and ‘rights’.

Search terms were used across a range of electronic databases and academic journals. A range of literature sources was identified during this first stage, and relevant articles, policy documents and programme briefs and reports were located.

Further sources were found by researching highlighted authors in the field of Comprehensive Sexuality Education and other variations of sexuality education. In addition to answering the research question, the methodology process supported the identification of gaps in literature and the formation or recommendations.
Part 1: Underpinnings of Comprehensive Sexuality Education

The concept of Comprehensive Sexuality Education is one which appears to have no one agreed upon definition, but there does seem to be general consensus across the literature that core elements of CSE programmes share certain similarities (UNESCO 2015). Despite a lack of agreement on a specific definition of Comprehensive Sexuality Education, many authors allude to similar components in their analysis of this form of sexuality education – particularly in recognising CSE’s onus on rights and agency. A leading voice in the field of CSE, UNESCO (2015, p12) defines ‘Comprehensive Sexuality Education’ as:

‘(An) Age-appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sexuality and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgmental information’

Offering a different definition, UNFPA’s ‘Operational Guidance for Comprehensive Sexuality Education’ (2014, p6) views ‘Comprehensive Sexuality Education’ as:

“A rights-based and gender-focused approach to sexuality education” for young people, whether they are in school or out of school.

The UNFPA brief notes that this definition of CSE has evolved from international standards and is seen to be compatible with most widely held views among partner organizations on crucial aspects of human rights-based and gender-focused sexuality education. Notably, despite both agencies representing the United Nations as an umbrella organization, each definition differs in the aspects of CSE they highlight – one makes reference to sexuality and relationships and cultural relevance, while the other emphasises rights and gender. Variation in definitions of CSE highlight the different understanding different actors have with regard to this form of sexuality education. Identifying the core components that are seen to make up the baseline criteria for CSE programmes and policies is important in that it allows for greater insight into assumptions and premises underlying CSE initiatives and allows for more meaningful evaluation of the design and delivery initiatives on the ground.

Which components underpin Comprehensive Sexuality education?

Across the literature, there is general consensus on the core elements that should be addressed in CSE programmes, that is, sexual and reproductive health and behaviours, sexuality and relationships, youth rights, participation and agency, and gender, power and social norms. These interlinked components are demonstrated in the diagram below.
The diagram illustrates the core components of Comprehensive Sexuality Education and their interlinked nature as part of this type of sexuality education. In what follows, these common themes present across the literature are examined further.

**Sexual and reproductive health and behaviours**

As with many types of sexuality education, almost all literature on the topic agrees that Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) must provide information about sexual health and combating health-related issues such as HIV/AIDS prevention, avoiding teenage pregnancy and eliminating female genital mutilation (FGM) (IPPF 2010). In addition to health, CSE places emphasis on personal development for young people - UNFPA defines CSE as ‘enabling young people to protect their health, wellbeing and dignity’ (2014, p5), while Goldfarb and Constantine contend that CSE ‘employs a health promotion and human development approach’ (2011, p3).

Within CSE, the concept of ‘health’ is perceived to be not only biological, but also emotional, psychological and social (Braeken and Cardinal 2008). While there is certainly attention to biological considerations linked with sexuality and sexual behaviours, many sources cite CSE as adopting a more complex, outward-looking understanding of these issues. In particular, literature suggests that sexuality education will have a positive impact on social norms, power dynamics and agency of young people and their communities (UNFPA 2016; Helmich 2009; Braeken and Cardinal 2008; McCave 2007).

Haberland and Rogow (2015) suggest that literature on CSE generally recommends holistic strategies for delivery which involve parents, teachers and peers, and which link to broader issues such as accessible health services and social norms change. This approach further promotes CSE not just as a form of sexuality and health-related education, but also rights and social education - an important factor in achieving SRHR for young people - and highlights its use as a means to address a range of development issues.

Comprehensive sexuality education initiatives are seen to be effective in changing sexual and protective behaviours in desired directions (Kirby et al 2007). In their interpretation of the effects of CSE, Haberland and Rogow (2015) support the view that CSE has positive impacts on behaviour change, such as increased condom use and delayed sexual debut as a result of increasing knowledge and changing attitudes, and argue that there is strong evidence to support the effectiveness of programmes in these areas (see also UNESCO, 2015, 2009). However, linking sexuality with the theme of sexual health, they also acknowledge that there is less evidence on whether CSE can change biological indicators, notably incidences of STIs, including HIV and pregnancy. Similarly, Miedema (2013) makes reference to studies which measured the quality of HIV/AIDS-related education, noting that those programmes which were found to be good quality or successful had little to no effect on STI and pregnancy rates, but were reported to delay sexual debut and increase contraceptive usage.

As part of affecting sexual behaviours, CSE is also linked with decision-making and building youth capabilities in relation to gender-based violence, implying that expanding the education and agency of young people strengthens gender equality and contributes to reshaping traditional gender norms in developing contexts. Browne (2015) notes that CSE programs typically consider changed behaviours of young people a success. According to UNESCO (2014), effective CSE programmes can also contribute to reshaping the social environment and opportunities for subsequent generations of young people.

Yet, while there are reported benefits of the positive effect CSE can have on sexual health and behaviours, there are also instances where sexuality education faces opposition or barriers within provision of information to young people. Roudsari et al (2013) discuss that, despite clear reasons for the necessity of sexual health education, in many contexts it is a contested issue due to socio-cultural challenges. Therefore, where there is resistance to sexuality education, it is possible that
groups of young people – notably young women, some religious communities, younger age groups and LGBTI/Queer youth – will be excluded from receiving sufficient information about sexual health. Roudsari et al (2013) go on to acknowledge that this exclusion of some groups of youth could be avoided by tactfully promoting the inclusion of sexual health education while considering the sensitivities of socio-cultural contexts. In a study on the effects of cultural settings on the provision of sexuality education programmes in Ethiopia, Browes (2015) suggests that pre-programme training and sensitisation processes for teachers, students’ parents and integrated attitude training for service providers can support with taking cultural influences in to consideration and promote the implementation of CSE programmes.

Sexuality and relationships

A core aspect of CSE relates to supporting young people with understanding their sexualities and focusing on building relationships. Recognising a shift towards addressing social dimensions in current approaches to sexuality education, SIECUS (2004, p13) states that sexuality education is a lifelong process focused on ‘acquiring information and forming attitudes and beliefs about topics such as identity, relationships and intimacy’.

While there appears to be general consensus on the intended or resulting effects of other aspects of Comprehensive Sexuality Education, there is opposition to a shift from education which focuses on sexual health to sexuality education, which combines provision of information about sexual health, relationships and sexual behaviours. Family Watch International’s policy brief on – or rather, against – CSE, argues that this shift has been made with the goal of teaching children ‘radical sexual ideologies’ which are ‘disguised as human rights education or life skills programmes’ (2016, p5).

There are conflicting opinions on the effect CSE has on sexuality and sexual behaviour. Some sources contend that CSE promotes promiscuity amongst children and young people; Levase notes instances where CSE programmes have been condemned for providing information which promotes risky sexual behaviour and unprotected sex (2003, p30). CSE purports to, and appears to be seen to, address questions with regard to sexuality, this intention forming a key reason for opposition to this form of sexuality education. However, it is unclear to what extent programmes and policies support meaningful exploration of issues such as pleasure or sexual activity – suggesting that CSE is often opposed as a result of the name alone and the connotations it has with teaching young people about sexuality beyond the rhetoric of abstinence before marriage.

Linking with the concept of sexuality, behaviours and agency, Fine and McClelland (2006) suggest that a focus on abstinence and an absence of discussion about desire within school-based sexuality education compromises the ability of young women to engage, negotiate or resist – ‘ Educated as neither desiring subjects seeking pleasure nor potentially abused subjects who could fight back, young women were denied knowledge and skills, and left to their own (and others’ devices in a sea of pleasures and dangers’ (p2). UNESCO’s (2015) brief on eliminating gender-based violence in schools suggests that while there is political will to address school-related gender-based violence (SRGBV) against children and women, there is less motivation to address more controversial issues such as gender and sexuality and the difficulties in shifting deep-seated social norms around these areas.

Similar to other components within CSE, there runs a risk of excluding groups of young people from obtaining relevant and supportive information due to a lack of detail or guidance for educators and learners. Greater attention has been paid to the sexuality of young women and how CSE as an approach can be further developed to support efforts to redress stereotypes and tackle SRGBV and violence against women and girls (VAWG) (Holden, Bell and Schauerhammer 2015). UNESCO (2015, p11) proposes that ‘there remains a need to develop sensitive programming that challenges exclusionary and discriminatory perspectives relating to gender and sexuality, to address the ways violence shapes masculine identities, and to promoting inclusive school cultures’, while Parkes
(2015) notes that in many contexts girls continue to be denied knowledge and choice as a result of emphasis only on abstinence, married heterosexuality and suppression of desire within ‘traditional’ sex education. Notions of sexuality are socially constructed (Parkes 2015) and it can be argued that sexuality education which is not comprehensive compromises the development of young men and women’s subjectivities (Fine 1988).

In addition, LGBT+ and non-binary identities are typically not included within literature on CSE (Browne 2015), despite facing significant barriers within many contexts, such as social stigma and criminalisation of same-sex relations (Advocates for Youth 2015). Therefore, allocating focus and guidance on the needs and experiences of these identities are also particularly relevant in terms of ensuring sexual and reproductive health and rights for all young people in developing countries (Human Rights Campaign 2015).

Despite limitations of the inclusivity of CSE as an approach, there are examples of literature which consider behaviours resulting from CSE which note that this form of sexuality education contributes more adequately to gains in young peoples’ sexual health in comparison to ‘less comprehensive’ programmes. Fine and McClelland discuss that advocates for CSE ‘place the genesis of social problems not in the act of teen sex but in the uneven social contexts in which teens develop and sex occurs’ (2006, p25) and that opposing abstinence models fail to provide adequate information for youth in general.

**Youth rights, participation and agency**

The theme of rights is a core focus across literature on the topic of Comprehensive Sexuality Education. There is common agreement that CSE is an empowerment-based approach to develop the knowledge, attitudes and life-skills of students to help them secure their sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) (Haberland and Rogow 2015).

Reports on challenges and opportunities around CSE suggest that, in addition to health-related aspects, effective CSE can contribute to enhancing self-esteem and decision-making amongst young people (UNESCO 2014; Gordon 2007). Comprehensive sexuality education is also utilised as a means of changing attitudes and building agency amongst children and youth (UNFPA 2016, UNESCO 2015a).

In addition, within literature choice is presented as a main goal of CSE, and is linked with the concept of agency as the ultimate objective of effective Comprehensive Sexuality Education. Regardless of specific focus or content, CSE places a focus on choice - that all young people have a right to be informed about their sexuality and their sexual and reproductive health and are entitled to make their own choices (UN Youth 2011; IPPF 2006).

CSE has youth rights and agency at its core, relying on participation and advocacy of youth in order to strengthen gender equality, agency around sexuality and alter social norms (IWHC 2015). With the aim of informing youth about their sexual and health-related rights (SRHR), the rights-informed focus of CSE is connected with physical, emotional and social development of young people.

Iyer and Aggleton (2014) make reference to ‘protectionist’ discourses which argue that adults are morally obligated to protect children from education which may encourage sexual experimentation and risk-taking and directly oppose notions of empowerment and agency found in more comprehensive frameworks for sexuality education.

Therefore, while promoting agency and rights form key goals, within various contexts there may be opposition to CSE due to socio-cultural limitations on the agency of adolescents and young people (Roudsari et al, 2013). Where limitations are placed on the agency of young people, there is greater need for expert guidance and the inclusion of a range of relevant actors within the development and implementation of CSE policies and programmes. For example, Haberland and Rogow (2015) note that many CSE experts recommend starting age-appropriate sexuality education as early as 5 years old and designate key concepts to present to children at different ages.
The participatory nature of CSE is also discussed as a key method employed by CSE programmes to enhance agency, include the voice of young people in learning about and vocalising requests or demands for their rights. Comprehensive Sexuality Education advocates for the participation of youth as part of programmes, rather than being passive recipients of information (Vanwesenbeeck et al 2015). In their focus on sexuality education from a rights-based perspective, Plan International advise that participation should also include parents, NGOs and local networks in policy, strategy and programme design (2010).

**Gender, power relations and social norms**

Throughout literature on the topic, the impact -- both proven, potential and intended -- of Comprehensive Sexuality Education on gender, rights and the empowerment of women is a prevalent theme. In terms of proven impact, often CSE is exemplified as having positive impact on empowering women and girls across developing contexts by tackling a range of social, economic and health-related issues. In many cases, reports and briefs note that CSE policies and programmes have the capacity to improve the rights of women and girls if implemented effectively, and enhance their agency around decisions related to sexuality and relationships, but also around other social and financial issues present in their lives.

Haberland and Rogow (2015) compare programmes which emphasise gender and power relations to those which ignore gender and power, and suggest that the latter was ‘conventional’ CSE. Highlighting the existence of a range of definitions or approaches to CSE, referring to gender-focused programmes as ‘conventional’ also further reinforces the expectation that CSE policies and programmes will seek to address gender inequalities and empower women and girls as a core goal.

Indeed, the majority of literature, policy briefs and programme reports on the topic of CSE at least reference the intended impact on gender relations, rights and redressing social norms which negatively impact women and girls across a range of contexts (UNFPA 2015; Browes 2015). Many explicitly cite the empowerment of women and girls as a goal of CSE programming - IWHC’s (2014) review of what constitutes CSE states that gender equality and personal empowerment are core aspects of this type of sexuality education.

The goal of improving gender equality and SRHR for young women and girls is a complex mission, which requires specific guidance in addressing the social norms and power dynamics which continue to entrench inequalities in many contexts. Therefore, while a commitment to gender equality as part of sexuality education is a positive step, it is crucial that CSE programmes and policies include practical results-based action. Haberland (2015) notes that CSE programmes have trailed in integrating gender or power perspectives due to ‘a lack of clarity about what a gender or power perspective means’ (p32) and how to integrate clarity and detail for both the educator and the learner.

Yet, some sources imply that international organizations and agencies are increasingly seeking to identify best practices and further develop CSE programmes as a means to support gender equality and empowerment. For example, the UNFPA (2015) published a report, ‘Evaluation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education Programmes: A Focus on the Gender and Empowerment Outcomes’, which resulted from a meeting and analysis of the outcomes of a range of CSE programmes implemented in different contexts globally.

**The components underpinning CSE: Comprehensive does not necessarily mean inclusive**

The literature suggests that the themes discussed above, that is, sexual and reproductive health and practices, sexuality and relationships, rights, participation and agency, and gender and power relations, constitute the central themes and components of CSE. While discussed separately in the section above, across literature it is clear that each of the components are intrinsically linked within CSE and none should be compromised or neglected. Literature on CSE generally agrees that the
necessary breadth and depth of CSE programmes means that implementers cannot pick and choose which topics they cover (UNFPA 2015).

Yet, despite this consensus on which core aspects make up CSE, across the literature varying levels of attention are afforded to each component. For example, opponents of CSE often focus on sexuality and how it affects the behaviours of young people (Roudsari et al 2013; Levasque 2003). Authors and organisations primarily interested in public health outcomes, such as reducing the spread and impact of HIV and AIDS, also concentrate on sexual health aspects and the biomedical markers thereof (IPPF 2014). Throughout international policies it is stated that CSE has or can have a positive role in empowering young people across a range of contexts and CSE as a human right (Boonstra 2011). Considerable weight is placed on gender equality within CSE-related policies of a range of international organisations – such as UN agencies (including UNESCO and UNFPA), Plan International and IPPF.

However, the way in which these components are approached is an area of considerable discussion across the literature. There are many aspects of each component of CSE which presents both inclusive and exclusionary aspects, and in some cases it could be argued that while the components of CSE are a ‘logical’ part of this approach they are not yet sufficiently ‘comprehensive.’ Briefly outlined above are examples of identities which may be neglected as a result of the continued abstract notion of CSE and its components, notably young women and girls, LGBT+ youth, young people facing economic issues and young people living in socio-cultural contexts which are not welcoming of sexuality education or contexts affected by conflict.

At present, reports and evaluations of CSE programme development and implementation identify many gaps in which aspects relating to sexual health, sexuality and relationships, agency and rights, and gender and power can be further developed within CSE programmes and policies. However, as noted in the introduction to this review, there is little critical analysis of the gaps present within Comprehensive Sexuality Education as an approach. CSE programmes are developed and evaluated based on international standards and norms around issues such as SRHR, education and gender. Yet, there can be a disconnect between agreed normative frameworks and the reality on the ground – Haggis and Mulholland (2014) argue that the hegemonic heterosexism which underpins ‘normative’ must be replaced with cultural, religious, gay and lesbian and class markers of difference, and go on to suggest that ‘normative’ should always be a question mark. By understanding that what is considered to be ‘normative’ does not necessarily mean inclusive, it is possible to further develop CSE as a concept to ensure it can enhance SRHR for young people across all contexts in which it is applied.

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**Part 2: Comparisons and debates around Comprehensive Sexuality Education**

While there is a wealth of information on Comprehensive Sexuality Education, many sources make reference to a lack of one definition of CSE or the ambiguity of the concept in general. There is wide-ranging agreement on the ‘rights-based’ focus on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE). Browes (2015) states that Comprehensive Sexuality Education is generally recognized as an effective method of sexual health education, addressing safe sexual practices, as well as underlying contextual issues such as gender inequality.

However, much of the debate around CSE relates not to the aims but to how CSE envisions achieving those goals and what ‘comprehensive’ means to actors, implementers and young people involved in these programmes. Haberland (2015, p 31) points out that the term ‘Comprehensive Sexuality Education’ ‘has evolved historically and continues to be used elastically’, and makes
reference to the fact that it can be used to describe complete and accurate educational content which refers to the use of contraception, regardless of whether it addresses gender, rights, equality or power.

It appears that the label of ‘Comprehensive Sexuality Education’ is at times misused or misunderstood in relation to other forms of sexuality education. Therefore, this section will aim to establish varying definitions of CSE and make comparisons with other prominent forms of sexuality education which CSE is linked to across literature.

### Varying definitions and related approaches: Similar but not the same?

The broad nature of Comprehensive Sexuality Education has resulted in a litany of debates around the nature of CSE and how it should be approached. Across the literature, definitions of CSE vary significantly in terms of perception about how broadly- or narrowly-defined the concept can be. Some scholars, policy-makers and programme implementers appear to consider CSE to be a general term for all sexuality education, while others define CSE as sexuality education which addresses a range of specific themes which are particularly focused on facilitating the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people. Illustrating this, Ketting et al (2015) propose that CSE can vary between promotion of abstinence to a ‘fully comprehensive’ approach, such as those developed by International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF). On the other hand, UNFPA (2014) notes that implementers cannot pick and choose which topics they want to implement when committed to CSE.

As mentioned above, there is general consensus that CSE is a rights-based approach to sexuality education, focused on providing a holistic experience for young people. Yet, it can be argued that this is a relatively ambiguous description of an increasingly popular response to SRHR for young people. As a result, many key players advocating CSE in the international community ‘skirt around’ the issue, promoting this approach to sexuality education without providing a clear definition of CSE or setting out specific requirements this form of sexuality education must adhere to beyond the abstract notion of a ‘holistic’ or ‘rights-based’ approach.

Debates as to what ‘comprehensive’ means, coupled with the lack of a concrete definition of CSE, may lead to it being conflated or confused with other types of sexuality education which are more definitive in their aims and methods. Some authors refer to CSE interchangeably with other forms of sexuality education which often represent different approaches but may have similar goals in enhancing sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) for young people. Important examples of such approaches include abstinence-plus and holistic sexuality education.

Therefore, it is useful to set out various approaches to Comprehensive Sexuality Education and to compare with other forms of sexuality education in order to map its conceptualisation across literature. Although there are many forms of sexuality education present within literature on SRHR, this part of the review will focus on two types of sexuality which are frequently discussed in relation to or synonymously with CSE; abstinence-plus education (also known as ABC), and holistic sexuality education (HSE).

### Abstinence-plus and variations

Despite distinct differences between the aims and approach of CSE and abstinence-only education (which teaches and promotes only abstinence before marriage), abstinence-based education also offers what presents itself as a ‘middle-of-the-road’ alternative in the form of Abstinence-plus education. The abstinence-plus approach is a form of sexuality education which includes information about contraception and condoms in the context of strong abstinence messaging (Howell 2001). Across literature on the topic, Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) is often linked with abstinence-plus, with some authors presenting the two terms as being synonymous with one another (Advocates for Youth 2001). Linking with the sexual health component of CSE, Underhill et al (2007) identify abstinence-plus as a comprehensive intervention,
noting that it promotes abstinence but also encourages use of condoms and safe-sex practices. It appears that abstinence-plus is often deemed to be ‘comprehensive’ due to its considerations of circumstances where abstinence may not be possible, in addition to the link between relationships, sexuality and sexual activity, sharing a broader and more complex approach to sexual behaviours than abstinence-only education. Abstinence-plus is also known as the ABC Approach, which stands for ‘Abstinence, Be Faithful, Use a Condom’, and is seen to promote safer sexual behaviours that have been credited with the decline of HIV/AIDS in contexts such as Uganda (Okware et al, 2005).

However, while Abstinence-plus/ABC may offer a more comprehensive form of sexuality education and addressing HIV/AIDS than abstinence-only approaches, it can be argued that its goals do not match those of CSE due to a lack of attention to the realities of gender norms in many contexts. Murphy et al (2006) make reference to the fact that in many settings where the ABC-approach would be implemented, women and girls often do not have control over their sex lives and may not have the option to abstain or negotiate condom use. This directly contradicts CSE’s widely agreed focus on agency, achieving gender equality and redressing power imbalances as a result of programmes adopting this approach.

In recent years there have been further developments to abstinence-plus education which bring it closer in line with the rights-based focus of CSE programmes. Dutch development organization, Educaids, refers to Comprehensive Sexuality Education programmes at least encompassing ABC, but preferably also paying attention to ‘DEF+ – Delay sexual intercourse, Equal consent, Fewer partners and testing’ (Educaids.nl). This onus on consensual relationships recognizes the need for choice and agency between both men and women, and also promotes safe sexual behaviours through testing, linking with the agency and rights and gender and power components which are present within CSE.

Abstinence-plus, ABC and ABC-DEF+ approaches do appear to resemble CSE, yet focus is still placed on abstinence, which CSE addresses but is not limited to (SIECUS, 2004). Conversely, Osorio et al (2015) view abstinence-plus and CSE education to be synonymous with one another and contend that this approach to sexuality education relies too heavily on condom-usage as a main preventative measure within sexual activity. It appears that both types of sexuality education are open to young people using contraception where needed, but differ in that abstinence-plus sees this as a last resort while CSE may be more open to young people having access to a range of contraceptives and sexual health services (UN Youth 2011).

From many perspectives, CSE and abstinence-plus approaches are seen to be similar or the same, but it is also evident that actors and authors consider ‘comprehensive’ to mean different things depending on their perspectives on sexuality education for youth. Abstinence-plus education appears to at least consider many of the same themes present within CSE, but does not have the same level of commitment to achieving young people’s rights and gender equality.

**Holistic Sexuality Education**

Across literature, definitions of CSE refer to it as a ‘holistic’ approach to sexuality education. Indeed, Ketting et al (2015) note that increasingly, CSE programmes reflect a holistic approach. Holistic Sexuality Education is characterised by a positive approach to sexuality in addition to promoting healthy and respectful behaviours with regard to sexuality and relationships (European Parliament 2016; Ollis 2014). Ponzetti (2015) states that HSE focuses on three core components; quality of life - including supporting the development of skills in line with different needs and helping young people to have positive sexual experiences, prevention of risky behaviours, and reaction or support following incidents.

In view of this, HSE appears to align with CSE in a number of ways, including consideration of sexuality and relationships, gender dynamics and the rights of children and young people. It further develops the notion of sexuality by supporting a critical approach to dominant discourse on … and challenging negative connotations associated with youth and sexual behaviour, which may jeopardize young people’s access to sexual health services and, ultimately, health. In addition, HSE
pays specific attention to the need for support for children and youth who experience sexual health problems, such as sexual abuse, unintended pregnancies or conflicted feelings about sexuality. These are issues that are addressed within some literature on CSE (Koehler et al 2008), but are not dominant themes.

Ketting et al (2015) note that a ‘holistic’ approach to CSE is demonstrated by guidelines developed by organizations such as International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), UNFPA and UNESCO. However, they also point out that Holistic Sexuality Education differs from alternatives such as CSE - which suggests that although CSE is often viewed as a holistic approach, HSE and CSE are not synonymous with each other.

Ponzetti (2015) makes reference to the fact that WHO Europe promotes a shift from CSE to HSE, but that the agency acknowledges that there is no clear boundary between the two. The main difference appears to be CSE’s focus on changing behaviours while HSE takes a ‘wider view of personal and sexual growth and development’ (WHO Europe and BZgA 2010, p17). HSE is reportedly mainly found in more ‘liberal’ European countries, such as Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium (Ponzetti, 2015). Arguably, there exists greater acceptance in these settings of young people’s sexuality than in many countries in the Global South, which may help explain the stronger focus on ‘personal and sexual growth’ as opposed to, for example, public health outcomes. While there is recognition of the differing needs youth have with regard to sexuality education across both approaches, CSE places greater focus on gender equality, rights, power dynamics and the impact of societal norms on sexuality and agency.

As mentioned earlier, increasing reference to CSE as a ‘holistic’ approach to sexuality education suggests that it will continue to shift towards positive interpretations of sexuality and sexual behaviours amongst youth as part of its focus on rights. However, it is noted that in addition to information about sexuality, truly ‘comprehensive’ CSE will also provide a range of contextually-relevant information, in order to ensure young people can make informed choice with regard to sexuality, relationships and sexual and reproductive health.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Broad focus leads to blurred definitions

It is clear that variation in how CSE is described within the literature and compared with other forms of sexuality education is dependent on how authors and actors conceptualise this approach. Such differing understandings of what Comprehensive Sexuality Education encompasses suggests that the approach is currently too vague in definition and too broad in content to provide a concrete framework for how CSE initiatives should be designed, delivered and evaluated.

If it is assumed that the abstract nature of CSE allows for different interpretations depending on context or the views of those involved in the development of programmes, then a typology of Comprehensive Sexuality Education should be established in order to provide guidance to policymakers and practitioners, and to ensure varying approaches are not misinterpreted or misaligned under the umbrella term ‘Comprehensive Sexuality Education’. CSE could be an approach that is adaptable and can be approached from several different perspectives, on the condition that it fulfils criteria around rights, sexual health, relationships and gender equality.

Alternatively, it is possible that CSE is not intended to be an umbrella term which can cover sexuality education ranging from pro-abstinence to pro-sex perspectives, and that currently definitions of CSE are simply too broad – which may lead authors, programme developers and implementing organizations to utilise the banner of CSE for less comprehensive forms of sexuality education.

Having compared CSE with other popular forms of sexuality education, it is evident that these different variations may share similarities but are not synonymous with one another.

Therefore, despite varying definitions of CSE, it is possible to differentiate this form of sexuality education by its attention to four core, interlinked components, which according to UNFPA (2015) constitute an essential minimum package for iniatives that aspire to be ‘comprehensive.’
The diagram below demonstrates the ways in which other forms of sexuality education broach these components:

**Diagram 2: How other variations of sexuality education approach the core components of CSE**

Within the diagram, the arrows indicate which of the core components of Comprehensive Sexuality Education each of the other variants of sexuality education discussed in the section above address. CSE is depicted as including four interconnected components. Other variations of sexuality education may tackle some of the same themes but not in the same manner. For example, abstinence-plus education also addresses all four components but approaches each in a different way, and sees the themes of sexuality and behaviours with sexuality and relationships as connected but not linked to the themes of gender and power and agency and rights.

Having compared Comprehensive Sexuality Education with other forms of sexuality education, the next section of this review will discuss the presence of CSE at international, national and local level, to distinguish the different conceptualisations of what makes CSE ‘comprehensive’.

**Part 3: CSE in Practice – Who decides what is ‘Comprehensive’?**

Understanding CSE as an approach is complex, not only because of the myriad of intertwining factors which make up such programmes and the social factors this form of sexuality education...
seeks to address, but also because achieving CSE-related aims requires adaptation of programme contents to contextual specificities.

Reports and research into CSE programmes and policies have noted that the particularities of context impact both the implementation and outcomes of programmes. As Ketting et al. (2015) note, CSE programmes vary depending on location, policy maker, programme designer, and those involved in the implementation process. Ponzetti (2015) echoes this, stating that not only is there not one agreed-upon definition of CSE, there is even less agreement on the content of these programmes. While there is general consensus on the main components of CSE, often these are relatively abstract within guiding documents and across literature on CSE and can at times fall short in ensuring that CSE is truly ‘comprehensive’. Further to this, it has been Watkins and Swidler argue that development projects take their form due to the interests of decision-makers, which in turn ‘leave only a narrow range of themes and practices that can ‘work’ on the ground’ (2012, p197). Watkins and Swidler go on to suggest that this is not because they are necessarily the most effective in addressing issues such as HIV prevention, but because they sufficiently satisfy the agendas of major players (2012).

While Comprehensive Sexuality Education may well be an effective approach to enhancing SRHR for young people, continued and expanded commitment to this form of sexuality education signals that it also satisfies the agendas of key actors in the international community. On the other hand, opposition to CSE found in some national and local contexts refutes the suggestion that this approach has been chosen simply because it is the most convenient.

Literature which examines the application of Comprehensive Sexuality Education at different levels highlights the different way in which the concept is approached at international, national and local levels. Across a range of sources it is apparent that the expectation of international policy agreements is that a normative and idealised approach to CSE filters through to national level and then to local level implementation – yet, this support for CSE at international level is not necessarily translated at the national and local levels, where at times CSE policy and programme development is met with socio-cultural or religious opposition. Similarly, at both national and local levels there have been programme reports which highlight room for improvement in the implementation of CSE and barriers experienced by educators, learners and other actors involved (or not involved) in CSE programmes. While reports of ineffectiveness in implementation of CSE programmes offer the opportunity to provide feedback ‘up’ to key influencers in the field of sexuality education, typically it appears that guidance on CSE is still ‘top-down’ as a result of continued support at the international level.

As such, the current flow of influence on Comprehensive Sexuality Education is demonstrated in the diagram below:

![Diagram 3: The anticipated influence of international policies on CSE at other levels](image)
The following section will discuss approaches to CSE at each level and suggest that the current flow of influence in deciding what makes CSE ‘comprehensive’ could be further evolved from a ‘top-down’ approach to a circular flow of learning and evolution.

**Support for CSE in International Agendas**

Building on recognition of the role the 1994 International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD) played in promoting sexuality education, IWHC (2015) also references ICPD+5 (1999), Beijing+5 – ‘Women 2000: Gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century’ (2000) and the Commission on Population and Development (2012) as key policy frameworks which have shaped international and national approaches to CSE. 25 years after Cairo, ICPD Beyond 2014 reconfirmed the international community’s commitment to investing in individual human rights, capabilities and dignity.

Policy frameworks around CSE have evolved in recent decades, as the approach has garnered popularity with the international community as an approach to address issues around overpopulation, HIV/AIDS, gender equality and supporting sustainable development in the Global South. As Ponzetti (2015) notes, there is a growing advocacy within the United Nations for the recognition of comprehensive sexuality information and education as a basic human right (United Nations, 2010). UN agencies such as UNESCO and UNFPA largely approach CSE from a rights-based perspective, and have created a range of guidelines and reports on the role of CSE in promoting SRHR for youth, and, more specifically, advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls globally.

There does appear to be growing recognition of the limitations of existing guidance on CSE - International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) developed their framework on Comprehensive Sexuality Education in response to the concerns from those involved in sexuality education about the need for more guidance on this form of education. They note that even in contexts where sexuality is culturally taboo, ‘if planned and developed in a sensitive and collaborative way, the most appropriate CSE programmes and guidelines can be implemented’ (2014, p4).

Literature focusing on conceptualising CSE at the meso level – primarily international agendas and policy frameworks set by multinational organizations and leading civil society voices in the field of SRHR and sustainable development - generally appear to promote CSE as a holistic approach (Ponzetti 2015), encouraging the development of positive attitudes towards sexuality and relationships, and supporting the participation, agency and empowerment of young people (FoSE 2011). While it can be agreed that international policy frameworks set a precedent for the goals which CSE programmes should work towards, the arguably ‘top-down’ influence of these frameworks may not be as easily translated at national and local levels.

Despite this, growing understanding of the need for a contextually-sensitive approach by international organizations such as IPPF suggests that those actors working at the international level could utilise a more ‘comprehensive’ and ‘holistic’ approach to CSE in order to create policies and programmes which are more relevant and efficient for youth within specific countries.

**Influence of Country Context**

At present, over 47 countries worldwide have CSE policies or programmes (UNESCO 2016). Browne (2015) notes that many countries’ approaches to CSE programs and policies are operating from the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo as a basis, which focused on human rights, population, sexual and reproductive health and sustainable development.

In 2014, the Special Session of the General Assembly endorsed the findings of the 20-year review of the ICPD (UNFPA 2014) and countries committed to intensified efforts in supporting individual dignity and rights as part of population and development. The evolution of international policy trends highlights not only growing national commitments the supporting gender equality and the
rights of the individual, but also suggests that approaches to CSE have evolved alongside these landmark forums and will continue to evolve in line with programme evaluations worldwide.

Although countries around the world have adopted CSE and political momentum has led governments to scale up their efforts (UNESCO 2015), in many settings there is opposition to this approach at the national macro level. Bruess and Schroeder (2014) discuss the different factors which contribute to opposition to what is seen to be ‘sex-positive’ education, and note that challenges to CSE often link to religious or political factors. Moreover, Bleanley (2010) discusses the effects of demographic, social and political factors on sex education policy preferences and, although referencing the USA as a particular case study, their research points out that these policies are at times mediated by beliefs about educational efficacy and the outcomes of different sexuality education programmes.

Browne (2015) refers to CSE as being viewed as a ‘Western’ concept, referencing the prevalence of abstinence-focused education in China. In line with this, Ponzetti (2015) points to the general acceptance of sexual activity amongst adolescents and young people in Western and European countries, which leads to strong cultural norms promoting safe sexual health and requirement of many government-led schools to provide comprehensive sexuality education and access to sexual health services. These norms do not necessarily automatically translate to non-Western contexts, and approaches to achieving the goals set out as part of CSE can differ as a result of different cultural norms around sexuality, gender equality and youth agency and rights.

Although many challenges to CSE are typically in favour of more conservative abstinence-focused approaches, there are also organizations and groups working in developing contexts which promote CSE in line with an abstinence-plus approach; ABC programmes have been implemented in many sub-Saharan African countries in response to HIV/AIDS epidemics but with the main focus on abstinence in mind.

Yet, Avert (2016) note that by the mid-2000s it was clear that HIV prevention must also take into account underlying socio-cultural, economic, political, legal and other contextual factors. Instead, ‘combination prevention’ methods which include structural interventions, behavioural intervention and biomedical interventions are now increasingly employed, which are grounded in rights-based, evidence-informed and community-owned programmes (UNAIDS 2010 in Avert 2016).

This notable shift in approaches to sexuality education suggests that there is now widespread acceptance of a rights-based and agency enhancing approach to sexuality education by many developing countries. Authors cite reasons for this, including limitations in the ability of traditional and restrictive approaches to address public health issues (Kirby 2007); agreement with this stance on SRHR and development; due to the requirements of funders or donors to adopt a rights-based approach to sexuality education for youth (UNESCO 2014); or as a result of pressure from...
multilateral organizations to promote ‘comprehensive’ sexuality education in this form (Osorio et al 2014).

It appears that at national levels there can be a clear understanding of the intention of international policy frameworks on the use of CSE for larger sustainable development issues such as gender equality, rights, youth agency and public-health issues such as the reduction of HIV/AIDs or maternal mortality amongst young women and girls. However, it is also evident that policies on CSE are also shaped by active forces at the national level, and it is here that the resulting processes and programmes may be shaped to fit current cultural and social norms within a country. The country case study of Burundi presents an example of a post-conflict country, which has entrenched social norms and challenges to providing comprehensive sexuality education and services to youth.

Due to different perspectives on what ‘comprehensive’ is and beliefs about which approaches to sexuality education ‘work,’ methods and content of CSE programmes vary within different country contexts. Making use of the ‘elasticity’ of definitions around CSE, the current ambiguous language used in policy guidelines could offer a valuable entry point for negotiation on how to inform CSE programmes in national and local contexts. Studies on the implementation of CSE programmes illustrate the practicalities of translating an internationally-guided concept at the local level and how this has resulted in different assumptions and conceptualisations about CSE.

Country example: Uganda

Implementation of the ‘World Starts With Me’ CSE programme has been widespread in Uganda – around 400 teachers trained and 58,000 students reached with CSE.

In Uganda, the effects of programme implementation have been evaluated by .... Rijsdijk et al (2014) make reference to the criminalization of homosexuality in Uganda and the presence of negative attitudes and norms towards sex amongst adolescents and condom usage - which differ from WSWM content and hinder teachers implementing WSWM the way it was intended.

Studies of the Uganda WSWM programme found that training improved teacher’s self-efficacy in identifying culturally-sensitive ways to provide CSE, and supportive school environments and national policies are essential for high-quality implementation of CSE (Rijsdijk et al 2014).

Implementation at local level

International policy frameworks may set out a specific vision of how CSE programmes should be approached, yet the reality of implementation suggests a divergence in opinion about what sexuality programmes for young people should involve, limited ability to effectively carry out programmes to achieve the goals of CSE, or in some cases, both. Across the literature, discussion about how CSE is approached at local levels typically focuses on the implementation and effects of CSE, and the presence of issues which limit or support programmes in local contexts. While there is little analysis of CSE as a concept at the micro level, there are examples of the range of attitudes towards CSE from involved actors and programme implementers within communities, particularly with regard to sexuality education in formal school systems (Vanwesenbeeck et al 2015; Aggleton and Iyer 2014).

Authors discussing the results of CSE programmes pay attention to both the successes and challenges of this form of sexuality education thus far. Across literature, there is evidence that CSE can have a positive (reported) impact - including delayed sexual debut amongst young people, changed behaviours with regard to gender norms and increased participation and agency of young people with regard to sexuality and relationships (UNFPA 2016; UNESCO 2016; Shaw 2009).

However, authors also reference the lessons learned from CSE programmes to date, including cases where teachers and students reinforced traditional gender roles, abstinence-only information was promoted above other knowledge, or young people did not have access to adequate sexual health services (Vanwesenbeeck et al 2015). In addition, there are many references to the need for
strengthening curricula (UNESCO 2015), training of educators (UNFPA 2014) and greater detail on the inclusion of complex topics such as sexuality, gender equality and power dynamics (Haberland 2015). This then suggests that the influence of a range of actors involved in CSE and their opinions on sexuality, gender equality, rights and youth participation can greatly affect how CSE is implemented at local levels.

Authors note that including relevant actors in the development and implementation process is key to ensuring CSE can be effective. Notably, UNFPA (2015a) advocates for improved ownership of programmes across communities, while Vanwesenbeeck (2015) point to the ‘Whole School Approach’ as a means of ensuring ownership of CSE programmes and promote the development of Comprehensive Sexuality Education programmes to ensure they can be effective for youth. Ponzetti (2015) highlights that misinformation about sex and its consequences remain common and challenges to implementing sexuality education continue to exist in many parts of the world.

Analysis of the CSE programme evaluations across literature highlight opportunities and challenges for further development of this form of sexuality education – the Uganda country example offers evidence of reviews of implementation of the ‘World Starts With Me’, there are instances of experiences at local level providing feedback ‘upwards’ on existing gaps and issues neglected within policy and programme briefs on CSE.

**Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Top-down guidance, for now**

It is clear from literature on CSE that approaches to this type of sexuality education vary at meso, macro and micro levels and shape the varied understandings of CSE as a result. As mentioned at the start of this review, in addition to ambiguity around a specific definition of CSE, there is little critique of the approach itself and analysis of the theory underpinning CSE is limited. As CSE programmes are evaluated and the complexities of developing contexts are included in policy and programme development, it is possible that CSE as a concept will continue to become more ‘comprehensive’ and reactive to the needs and voices of young people.

However, in order to support the continued evolution of Comprehensive Sexuality Education as a means to enhance SRHR for young people across a range of contexts, it is crucial that future international frameworks are influenced by the experiences of youth, educators and implementers at national and local levels. Therefore, rather than a top-down approach to guidance on CSE policy and programme development, a circular learning process would support with grounding the abstract and normative nature of CSE. Ideally, this would result in a clearer definition of Comprehensive Sexuality Education and provide additional understanding of what this form of sexuality education could and should involve from context to context.

Diagram 4: Suggested influence of each level in influencing the development of CSE policies and programmes
While debates continue on the means by which this can be achieved, there are many aspects of CSE to be explored further. The final section of this review will make recommendations for making CSE as an approach more ‘comprehensive’.

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Part 4: Gaps in literature and Recommendations

Despite the breadth and depth of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), literature often presents it as an ‘idealistic’ approach to achieving sexual and reproductive health and rights for young people in developing countries. CSE purports to be an inclusive, rights-based approach to sexuality education, yet it is evident that experiences of traditionally marginalized or under-served communities and populations which are operating outside ‘standard’ education systems are not always adequately represented. With regard to this, policy makers and programme developers have not provided specific guidance and focus for these sensitive considerations or specific contexts in which CSE must be implemented.

While there are many complexities and context-specific issues present to take into account, there are some aspects which have considerable effects for young people and should be included as part of the development of Comprehensive Sexuality Education. Therefore, this section will discuss apparent gaps in literature and make recommendations to support future CSE policies and programmes.

Understanding Comprehensive Sexuality Education as an approach

The aim of this literature review is to establish what Comprehensive Sexuality Education involves and what is perceived to make programmes and policies ‘comprehensive’ across literature on the topic. While there is a great range of information on CSE from a variety of authors, organisations and institutions, beyond sources which opposed CSE on socio-cultural or religious grounds there is little in-depth discussion or critical analysis of ‘Comprehensive Sexuality Education’ as a guiding concept.

Often, CSE is heralded as a holistic, rights-based approach to enhancing SRHR for young people, addressing public health issues and tackling gender inequalities. Certainly, there are reports of the benefits of this type of sexuality education, yet much of the critique of CSE is linked to programme implementation and content.

Therefore, in addition to evaluation of programmes and policies, more in-depth examination of the theoretical underpinnings of CSE may be beneficial hold programme developers, policy makers and practitioners to a certain standard of Comprehensive Sexuality Education and contribute to ensuring it can be truly ‘comprehensive’ across many contexts.

Neglect of ‘non-normative’ sexualities

LGBT issues and relationships don’t feature across literature on CSE, despite being a key issue in terms of rights, sexuality and norms. Some scholars note that there is a lack of focus on same-sex relationships across literature on CSE (for example, Browne 2015). In addition, there was little or no discussion of the role of CSE with regard to transgender or gender-identities or issues facing disabled youth.
It is unclear whether LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and other sexual identities) and non-binary identities receive minimal focus within documentation about CSE as a result of unintentional oversight of policy and programme developers, or due to deliberate exclusion because these particular experiences are sensitive or controversial in many contexts.

As part of the rights-based and agency-enhancing goals underpinning CSE as an approach, this is a void that requires addressing: Human Rights Campaign (2015) contends that LGBT+ and questioning youth ‘need and deserve’ to learn in settings that are inclusive of their experiences and receive knowledge and access to services that secure their health and safety.

Many authors discussing Comprehensive Sexuality Education explicitly make reference to the goal of supporting adolescents and young adults with becoming comfortable and confident in their sexuality and with regard to building healthy relationships (UNESCO 2015). Echoing this, several organizations (including Advocates for Youth, Answer, GLSEN, Human Rights Campaign, Planned Parenthood, Rutgers and SIECUS) working in the field of sexuality education or SRHR for young people have called for improved and inclusive programmes and policies to ensure positive sexual health outcomes for all youth.

CSE in conflict-affected contexts

Literature on Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) frequently makes reference to its implementation in developing countries and the need for ensuring programmes are tailored to the context-specific needs of young people in order to be effective. However, across literature there is little attention given to the application of CSE in conflict-affected contexts and its potential role in peacebuilding processes.

Much has been written about the role of education in conflict and peacebuilding contexts, and the effect education systems can have on rebuilding shattered infrastructures and transitional peacebuilding (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Smith et al 2011). Yet the role of CSE (and sexuality education in general) in these settings has been neglected, despite the fact that many developing contexts are experiencing or have experienced conflict and war.

Across literature, reference is made to the need to ensure that children and young people have access to education during conflict, due to social and economic benefits it can provide (UNESCO 2012). Many authors discuss the importance of conflict-sensitive education as a means by which social and cultural values can be transmitted from generation to generation and, in some circumstances, convey stereotypes and attitudes which condone violence and conflict (Smith et al 2011).

Gender inequalities, diminished rights for children and young people, and restricted agency are issues which are present in many countries. However, these issues are often compounded in locations experiencing the effects of conflict and crisis, leading to vulnerability and exclusion amongst youth (McLean Hilker and Fraser 2009). In addition, the sexuality and sexual orientation of young people is typically ignored within educational interventions in conflict-affected settings, despite requiring clear and sensitive consideration in programme planning (Lopes Cardozo et al 2015).

Considering the rights-based focus of Comprehensive Sexuality Education and aims to enhance the agency and participation of young people, reduce gender inequalities, reshape traditional or harmful social and cultural norms and encourage safe sexual health and behaviours, establishing concrete guidelines on sexuality education in conflict affected contexts is important for young people and their wider communities in these settings.
Conclusion

As mentioned throughout this review, Comprehensive Sexuality Education aims to cover a wide range of subjects in order to effectively inform, support and engage with young people and their experiences and needs. This literature review made reference to the fact that approaches to CSE differ from context to context and level to level. While there are core components of CSE which must be present in programmes and policies, the approach itself must be adapted to the specific issues facing adolescents and young people at local and national levels.

The recommendations made above intend to highlight spaces where Comprehensive Sexuality Education could better be improved. Across literature, CSE is often presented as an ‘idealistic’ approach to sexuality education as a result of its right-based focus, but at times appears to fall short in considering these factors which affect the extent to which young people can safely explore, understand and navigate their sexualities. It is crucial then to ensure that CSE as an approach is grounded not only in promoting rights and agency, but also in the lived experiences of young people in their social, cultural, political and economic contexts and is responsive to these in order to truly provide a ‘comprehensive’ approach to sexuality education.
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