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Understanding the ‘Comprehensive’ in Comprehensive Sexuality Education

A Literature Review

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Structure of the review.....	3
Methodology	3
Part 1: Components of Comprehensive Sexuality Education	4
Sexual and reproductive health and behaviours	4
Sexuality and relationships	5
Youth rights, participation and agency.....	6
Gender equality, power relations and social norms.....	6
The components underpinning CSE: Comprehensive does not necessarily mean inclusive	7
Part 2: Comparisons and debates around Comprehensive Sexuality Education	8
Abstinence-plus and variations	8
Holistic Sexuality Education.....	9
Closing	10
Part 3: CSE in Practice – Who decides what is ‘Comprehensive’?	11
Support for CSE in International Agendas	12
CSE at Country Level	12
Implementation at local level.....	14
Comprehensive Sexuality Education: Top-down guidance, for now	15
Part 4: Gaps in literature and Recommendations	16
Neglect of ‘non-normative’ sexualities.....	16
CSE in conflict-affected contexts	16
Conclusion	17
Bibliography.....	18

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, as this review will highlight, considerable variations exist in understanding what makes a programme or policy 'comprehensive'.

A leading voice in the field of CSE, UNESCO (2015, p. 12) defines CSE 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, p. 6) states that CSE is:

'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 organisations on crucial aspects of human rights-based and gender-focused sexuality education. As these excerpts clarify, the two agencies differ in the aspects of CSE they highlight – one making reference to sexuality and relationships and cultural relevance, the other emphasising rights and gender. Such variations in definitions of CSE highlight the different understandings different actors have with regard to this form of sexuality education, complicating meaningful evaluation of the design and delivery of CSE initiatives on the ground (Nwake, 2013).

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, 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 leaves considerable space for interpretation.

In reviewing a range of literature sources on CSE – including briefs, policy documents and programme reports – it was noted that, in addition to ambiguity around specific definitions 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 theoretical underpinnings of CSE is limited. Some aspects of CSE – such as attempts to integrate a more positive approaches to young people's sexuality -- can also present significant challenges in creating truly 'comprehensive' programmes and policies. **This review aims to examine 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.** In the presentation of the review, four cross-cutting issues will be addressed:

1. **Broad, but lacking definition.** 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 their own decisions. However, in its bid to be holistic, the abstract nature of CSE, 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. Where CSE does not address the experiences and needs of all young people within a context, it 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. CSE advocates tend to emphasise the need to develop CSE with socio-cultural sensitivities in mind but doing so can mean that the degree to which programmes or policies can be deemed comprehensive may be compromised.
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 CSE and is divided into the following sections:

Part 1 discusses the core components of CSE and their inclusion in literature on the topic.

Part 2 further discusses the range of definitions attributed to CSE, 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** presents 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

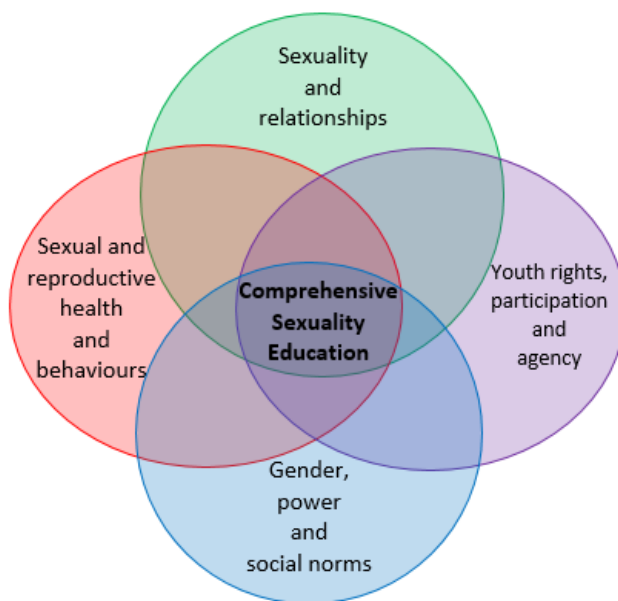
The aim of this review was to understand the core components and definitions attributed to CSE, and how CSE programmes and policies are developed and implemented across a range levels. Therefore, the first step of the review was to establish search terms that would be used to identify relevant literature. Key search terms linked to the main research question included 'comprehensive sexuality education,' 'sex and sexuality education,' HIV- and AIDS-related education,' 'gender', 'sexuality', 'sexual and reproductive health', in combination with '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 CSE and other variations of sexuality education. In addition to answering the research question, the review led to identification of gaps in literature and formulation of recommendations.



Part 1: Components of Comprehensive Sexuality Education

As noted, the concept of CSE is one that appears to have no one agreed upon definition. Despite this apparent 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 the following themes and issues: 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. In what follows, these common themes present across the literature are examined further. The presentation of the core components also includes a discussion of challenges in relation to the provision of education on specific issues and topics.



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Diagram 1: Components of Comprehensive Sexuality Education

Sexual and reproductive health and behaviours

As with many types of sexuality education, almost all literature on the topic agrees that CSE must provide information about sexual health and tackling health-related issues such as HIV and AIDs, teenage pregnancy and female genital cutting or mutilation (FGC/M) (IPPF 2010). In addition to health, CSE places emphasis on personal development for young people -- UNFPA defining CSE as ‘enabling young people to protect their health, wellbeing and dignity’ (2014, p. 5), while Goldfarb and Constantine contend that CSE ‘employs a health promotion and human development approach’ (2011, p. 3).

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, UNESCO 2014, Helmich 2009, Braeken and Cardinal 2008, McCave 2007).

Haberland and Rogow (2015) observe that CSE entails holistic strategies for delivery that involve parents, teachers and peers, and which link to broader issues such as accessible health services and social norms change. This approach further highlights that CSE tends to be regarded not just or only as a form of sexuality and health-related education, but also a form of rights and social education, and highlights its perceived importance as a means to address a range of development issues.

Sexuality education initiatives are broadly regarded as 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 can have 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 bio-medical indicators, notably prevalence of STIs, including HIV and unwanted or unplanned pregnancy. Similarly, Miedema (2013) makes reference to studies which measured the quality of HIV and AIDs-related education, noting that those programmes which were found to be of good quality or successful, while reported to delay sexual debut and increase contraceptive usage, had little to no effect on STI prevalence rates and unplanned pregnancy.

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 LGBT+ youth – will be excluded from receiving sufficient information about sexual health..

Sexuality and relationships

Closely linked to the previous component, the second 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, p. 13) 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’. There are conflicting opinions on the effect CSE has on sexuality and sexual behaviour. Some sources contend that Comprehensive Sexuality Education promotes promiscuity amongst children and young people – Family Watch International (2016), for example, argues that children are being taught ‘radical sexual ideologies’ which are ‘disguised as human rights education or life skills programmes’ (p. 5). Various authors have noted instances where CSE programmes have been condemned for providing information seen to promote risky sexual behaviour and unprotected sex (e.g. Levesque 2003). While CSE purports to, and appears to be seen to, address questions with regard to sexuality and this intention forms a key reason for opposition to CSE, it is unclear to what extent programmes and policies actually support meaningful exploration of issues such as pleasure or sexual relationships – suggesting that CSE is often opposed as a result of the name alone and its association with teaching young people about sexuality beyond the rhetoric of abstinence before marriage.

The work of Fine and McClelland (2006) has been critical in highlighting the absence of discussion about desire within school-based sexuality education initiatives, arguing this situation compromises the ability of young women to engage, negotiate or resist sexual relationships. In the authors’ words: ‘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’ (p. 2). In a somewhat similar vein, 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) more broadly (Parkes et al 2017, Holden, Bell and Schauerhammer 2015). UNESCO (2015, p. 11) 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 the emphasis in sexuality education on abstinence, marriage and suppression of desire within 'traditional' sex education. The absence of attention for, and often active silencing of, LGBT+ and non-binary identities, desires and relationships, further limits the degree to which CSE can be considered 'comprehensive' (Human Rights Campaign 2015).

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). Notions of rights and agency are not only at the core of the goals of CSE, but also central to conceptions of means of education. That is, CSE initiatives often rely on young people's participation and advocacy in order to include the voice of young people in learning about and vocalising demands for their rights, strengthen gender equality and agency around sexuality, and alter social norms (UNFPA 2016, IWHC 2015, UNESCO 2015a).

Reports on challenges and opportunities around CSE suggest that, in addition to health-related aspects, CSE can contribute to enhancing self-esteem and decision-making amongst young people (UNESCO 2014, Gordon 2007). Within the literature, choice is presented as a main goal of CSE, and is linked with the concept of agency as the ultimate objective of 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).

Iyer and Aggleton (2014) make reference to 'protectionist' discourses wherein adults are positioned as morally obligated to protect children from education that may encourage sexual experimentation and risk-taking, and young people are expected to obey their elders rather than make independent decisions (see also Roudsari et al, 2013). Such protectionist rhetoric can thus directly oppose notions of empowerment, choice, and agency found in more comprehensive frameworks for sexuality education. Where limitations are placed on the agentic space of children and 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. Comprehensive Sexuality Education thus advocates for the participation of youth as part of programmes, rather than being passive recipients of information (Vanwesenbeeck et al 2015), but in light of efforts to make CSE context-specific and sensitive, 'participation' can also be conceived as referring to the involvement of parents and local civil society and faith-based organisations in policy, strategy and programme design (Plan 2010).

Gender equality, power relations and social norms

Throughout literature on the topic, the intended impact of CSE on gender equality, rights and the empowerment of women is a prevalent theme. CSE is often exemplified as having potential positive

impact on women and girls' agency around decisions related to sexuality and relationships by tackling a range of social, economic and health-related issues. 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' reinforces the expectation that CSE policies and programmes 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 (Browes 2015, UNFPA 2015). Many explicitly cite the empowerment of women and girls as a goal of CSE programming - IWHC's (2014) review of what constitutes CSE stating 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. 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' (p. 32) and how to integrate clarity and detail for both the educator and the learner. International organisations are increasingly seeking to identify best practices and further develop CSE programmes as a means to support gender equality and empowerment (e.g. UNFPA 2015).

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 here, 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, some agencies concentrating on— at least in theory – notions of gender equality and empowerment, while others place greater emphasis on public health outcomes and, consequently, sexual health and biomedical markers thereof (UNFPA 2015, IPPF 2014). Opponents often hone in on CSE's engagement with sexuality and sexual relations, critiquing the perceived negative impact of such education on young people's morality and social cohesion (Roudsari et al 2013, Levesque 2003).

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. The ways in which the four components discussed here are approached in CSE initiatives 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 possibilities – the inclusionary potential of CSE initiatives mainly falling short in relation to LGBT+ youth, young people facing economic issues and young people living in contexts affected by conflict.

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. For example, in relation to non-heterosexual youth, Haggis and Mulholland (2014) argue that the hegemonic heterosexism which underpins underlying normative frameworks 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 the norm in CSE 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.



Part 2: Comparisons and debates around Comprehensive Sexuality Education

In spite of the absence of a unified conception of CSE and its aims, 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.' Debates as to what 'comprehensive' means, 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.

Building on the four core components presented in Part 1, this next section aims to further clarify key characteristics of CSE by comparing this form of sexuality education with other prominent forms of such education which CSE is linked to across the 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 is presented as a 'middle-of-the-road' alternative in the form of Abstinence-plus education. The abstinence-plus approach is a form of sexuality education that includes information about contraception and condoms in the context of strong abstinence messaging (Howell 2001). 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 and AIDS in contexts such as Uganda (Okware et al, 2005).

Across literature on the topic, 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. Abstinence-plus thus often appears to be seen as '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.

However, while Abstinence-plus/ABC may offer a more comprehensive form of sexuality education and addressing HIV and 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 is 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. In theory, these kinds of barriers to achieving gender equality and redressing power imbalances would form a key focus within CSE initiatives. Fine and McClelland note that, contrary to the field of abstinence education, 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, p. 25) and that abstinence models fail to provide adequate information for youth in general.

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 organisation, 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 no date). This onus on consensual relationships recognises 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 both approaches to sexuality education rely too heavily on condom-usage as a main preventative measure within sexual activity. It appears that, at least on paper, both types of sexuality education are thus open to young people using contraception where needed, but differ in that abstinence-plus sees this as a last resort while within CSE there may be more openness to young people having access to a range of contraceptive products and 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, agency, gender equality and LGBT+ inclusivity.

Holistic Sexuality Education

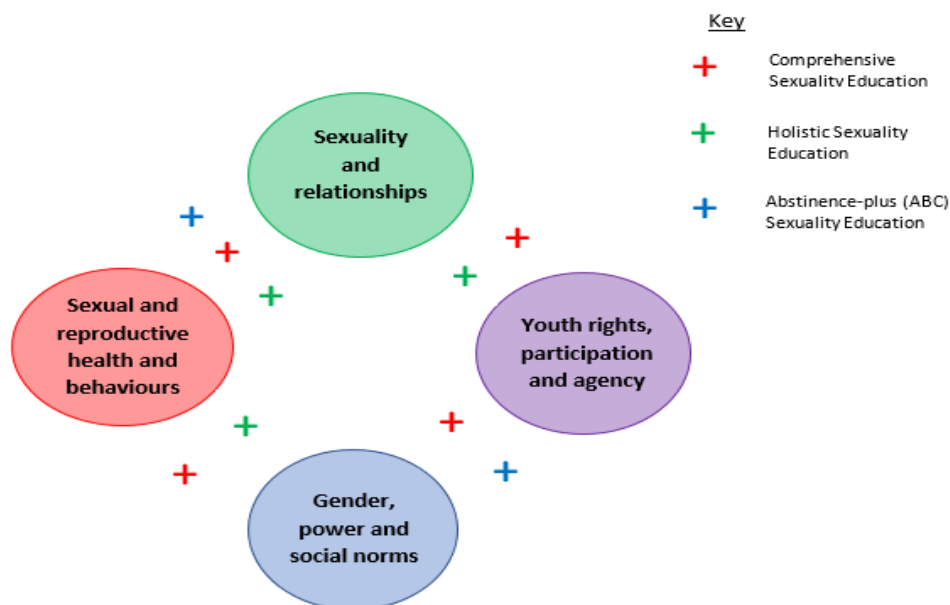
Across the literature, definitions of CSE refer to it as a 'holistic' approach to sexuality education. Indeed, Ketting et al (2015) note that increasingly, CSE programmes reflect a holistic approach. Holistic Sexuality Education (HSE) is characterised by a positive approach to sexuality in addition to 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: 1) quality of life - including supporting the development of skills in line with different needs and helping young people to have positive sexual experiences; 2) prevention of risky behaviours; and 3) reaction or support following incidents. HSE thus 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. However, despite recognition of the differing needs youth have with regard to sexuality education across both approaches, CSE appears to place greater focus on notions of gender equality, rights, power dynamics and the impact of societal norms on sexuality and agency, at least in theory.

Contrary to CSE, Holistic Sexuality Education further develops the notion of sexuality by supporting a critical approach to dominant discourse and challenging negative connotations associated with youth and sexual relations, which may jeopardise 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 organisations 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, p. 17). 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. Increasing reference to CSE as a 'holistic' approach to sexuality education could suggest that it will continue to shift towards positive interpretations of sexuality and sexual behaviours amongst youth as part of its focus on rights.

Closing

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



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

Within the diagram, CSE is depicted as including four interconnected components. The +-signs in the diagram indicate which of the core components of Comprehensive Sexuality Education each of the other variants of sexuality education address (as discussed in Part 1). 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. The comparison of CSE with other popular forms of sexuality education reveals that these different approaches may share similarities but are not synonymous with one another.

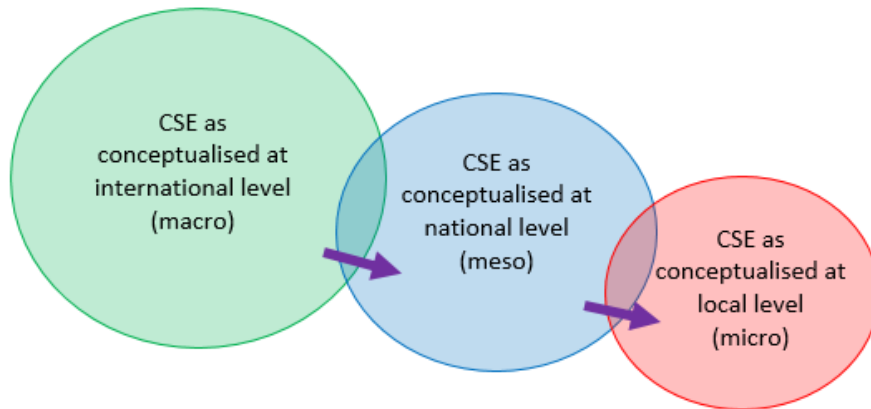
Having compared Comprehensive Sexuality Education with other forms of sexuality education, the next section of this review will discuss the presence of CSE at international, national and local level, to distinguish the different conceptualisations of what makes CSE 'comprehensive'.



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, but also because achieving CSE-related aims requires adaptation of programme contents to contextual specificities. 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 finding, stating that not only is there not one agreed-upon definition of CSE, there is even less agreement on the content of these programmes across different settings and contexts. Further to this, Watkins and Swidler (2012) argue that development projects take their form in keeping with the interests of decision-makers, 'leav[ing] only a narrow range of themes and practices that can 'work' on the ground' (p.197). The authors point out that choice of goals and strategies is not necessarily based on evidence regarding efficacy in addressing issues such as HIV transmission, but because they sufficiently satisfy the agendas of major players .

Research on the conceptualisation of Comprehensive Sexuality Education at multiple 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 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 CSE is demonstrated in the diagram below:



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Diagram 3: The anticipated influence of international policies on CSE at other levels

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 of the 1994 International Conference of Population and Development (ICPD) 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. Twenty five 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 and 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. At the same time, there appears to be growing recognition of the limitations of existing guidance on CSE. For example, International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) developed their 2014 framework on Comprehensive Sexuality Education in response to the concerns from those involved about the absence of sufficient guidance on this form of education.

Literature focusing on conceptualising CSE at the macro level – primarily international agendas and policy frameworks set by multinational organisations 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).

CSE at Country Level

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 national levels. Bruess and Schroeder (2014) discuss the different factors that 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. Bleakley and colleagues (2010) discuss 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 CSE and access to sexual health services. These norms do not necessarily 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 opponents of CSE are typically in favour of more conservative abstinence-focused approaches, there are also organisations 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 and AIDS epidemics but with the main focus on abstinence in mind. Yet, AVERT (2016) notes that by the mid-2000s it was clear that HIV prevention must take in to account underlying socio-cultural, economic, political, legal and other contextual factors. 'Combination prevention' methods which are grounded in notions of rights, evidence and community-ownership, and include structural interventions, behavioural intervention and biomedical interventions are now increasingly employed (UNAIDS 2014 in AVERT 2016).

Country example: The World Starts With Me (WSWM) Burundi

From 2016-2020 Comprehensive Sexuality Education programme 'The World Starts With Me' (WSWM) is being implemented in the formal education curriculum at national level in Burundi, using a programme adapted for the country context (Vanwesenbeeck et al 2015).

Implemented by a range of actors, the joint WSWM programme aims to institutionalise CSE in the school environment in Burundi.

Drawing on the successes of the WSWM in other countries and in the African region, information on the implementation of CSE in Burundi does not refer specifically to the adaptation of programmes for this conflict-affected context, but does acknowledge that young people in Burundi face significant challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health education and services (Cordaid 2015).

Following the conflict, Burundi has made progress in the promotion of SRHR for young people, but sexuality education, gender-based and sexual violence and gender-related power imbalances remain a challenge. Cordaid (2015) note that recent reforms to the education system in Burundi offer the opportunity for a range of partners to work together to ensure sexuality education is applied as extensively and comprehensively as possible. A Mission Report submitted to Share-Net International suggests that programme developers and implementers should take socio-cultural and religious practices into account and make use of existing practices which work in the country context (Nzokirishaka 2014).

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 countries in the Global South. Scholars cite various reasons for this shift, including recognition of the limited ability of traditional and restrictive approaches to address public health issues (Kirby 2007); growing agreement with regard to this stance on sexuality education and SRHR; the need to meet requirements of donors to adopt a rights-based approach to sexuality education for youth (Osorio et al 2014, UNESCO 2014).

While there may be clear understanding at national levels of the intent of international policy frameworks on the use of CSE for larger sustainable development issues such as gender equality, it is also evident that policies on CSE are actively shaped by multiple national actors, and it is here that the resulting processes and programmes may be shaped to fit current cultural and social norms within a country (Rijsdijk et al 2014, Miedema 2013).

Country example: The World Starts With Me (WSWM) Uganda

Implementation of the 'World Starts With Me' CSE programme has been widespread in Uganda – around 400 teachers were trained and 58,000 students reached with CSE. Studies of the Ugandan 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). However, Rijsdijk et al (2014) make reference to the criminalisation 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.

Implementation at local level

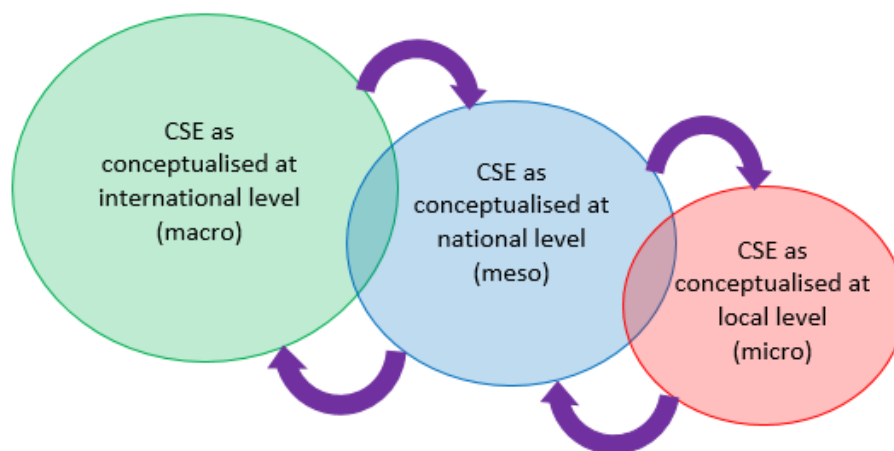
International policy frameworks may set out a specific vision of how CSE programmes should be approached, yet the reality of implementation suggests a divergence in opinion about what sexuality programmes for young people should involve, limited ability to effectively carry out programmes to achieve the goals of CSE, or in some cases, both. Including relevant actors in the development and implementation process is broadly regarded as key to ensuring CSE is 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. Research on WSWM in Uganda highlights experiences of local level actors providing feedback 'upwards' on existing gaps and issues neglected within policy and programme briefs on CSE.

Across the literature, research on 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 (e.g. Page 2016). 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 (UNESCO 2016, UNFPA 2016, Shaw 2009). However, authors also discuss 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 is a growing body of research highlighting needs in terms of strengthening curricula (UNESCO 2015), training of educators (UNFPA 2014) and greater detail on the inclusion of complex topics such as sexuality, gender equality, participation and power dynamics (Page 2016, Haberland 2015, Miedema et al 2015).

While there is growing attention for the design, delivery and uptake of CSE at local levels, including some research on the range of attitudes towards CSE from involved actors and stakeholders, particularly with regard to sexuality education in formal school systems (Vanwesenbeeck et al 2015, Aggleton and Iyer 2014), there remains little analysis of conceptions of CSE at these levels,

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 macro, meso, and micro levels and shape the varied understandings and delivery 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 limited analysis of notions underpinning CSE. As CSE programmes are evaluated and the complexities of developing contexts are included in policy and programme development, it is possible that CSE will become more ‘comprehensive’ and reactive to the needs and voices of young people. However, in order to support the continued evolution of CSE as a means to enhance SRHR for young people across a range of contexts, it is crucial that future international frameworks are mindful of perspectives and 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, such a process would result in attaining greater practical understanding among, and consensus between, different sets of actors in and across varying contexts as to what, in concrete terms, Comprehensive Sexuality Education initiatives should, at a minimum, encompass.



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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’.



Part 4: Gaps in literature and Recommendations

The literature often presents CSE as an 'idealistic' approach to achieving sexual and reproductive health and rights for young people in the Global South. 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 that operate outside formal education systems are not always adequately represented. 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. This section will discuss two critical gaps in available literature on CSE and make recommendations to support future CSE policies and programmes.

Neglect of 'non-normative' sexualities

LGBT+ issues and relationships do not 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. Many authors 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 organisations working in the field of sexuality education or SRHR for young people (including Advocates for Youth, Answer, GLSEN, Human Rights Campaign, Planned Parenthood, Rutgers and SIECUS) have called for improved and inclusive programmes and policies to ensure positive sexual health outcomes for *all* youth. On this view, a comprehensive approach to sexuality education entails providing learning spaces for LGBT+ and questioning youth that are inclusive of their experiences and provide knowledge and access to services that secure their health and safety (Human Rights Campaign 2015).

CSE in conflict-affected contexts

Literature on CSE frequently makes reference to its implementation in the Global South and the need for ensuring programmes are tailored to the context-specific needs of young people in order to be effective. However, there is little attention given to the application of CSE in conflict-affected contexts and its potential role in peacebuilding processes. Gender inequalities and diminished rights for children and young people 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 increased socio-economic vulnerability of 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).

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 education in conflict and peacebuilding processes, and, crucially, the role of education in inter-generational transmission of social and cultural values (Smith et al 2011, Bush and Saltarelli 2000). Yet the role of CSE (or sexuality education more generally) in these settings has been neglected, despite the widespread occurrence of conflict and war around the world and the potential of CSE to challenge existing gendered and sexualised norms and inequalities. Considering the rights-based focus of Comprehensive Sexuality Education and aims to enhance the agency and participation of young people, reduce gender inequalities and encourage

safer sexual health and behaviours, establishing concrete guidelines on sexuality education in conflict affected contexts is important for young people and their wider communities.



Conclusion

The broad nature of CSE has resulted in a litany of debates around the goals of CSE and how it should be designed and delivered. Across the literature, definitions of CSE vary significantly in terms of perception about how broadly- or narrowly-defined the concept can be. As Ketting et al (2015) observe, CSE can vary between promotion of abstinence to a ‘fully comprehensive’ approach, such as those developed by IPPF. Thus 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 with a particular focus on facilitating the sexual and reproductive health and rights of young people. The ambiguous description of an increasingly popular response to SRHR for young people contributes to a ‘skirting around’ the issue, whereby CSE is promoted without providing a clear definition of CSE and setting out specific requirements or indicators for this form of sexuality education beyond the abstract notion of a ‘holistic’ or ‘rights-based’ approach.

As mentioned throughout this review, CSE aims to cover a wide range of subjects in order to effectively inform, support and engage with young people and their experiences and needs. The review identified four core components of CSE and areas of (dis)agreement with other approaches to sexuality education: 1) Sexual and reproductive health and behaviours; 2) Sexuality and relationships; 3) Youth rights, participation and agency; 4) Gender equality, power relations and social norms. Clarifying these broad areas of consensus in relation to what constitutes the ‘comprehensive’ in ‘Comprehensive Sexuality Education,’ the review also highlighted the often mentioned need to adapt this form of sexuality education to specific issues faced by young people in different contexts and the need to involve local actors in programme design.

In closing, across the literature, CSE is often presented as an ‘idealistic’ approach to sexuality education as a result of its right-based focus and the inclusionary connotations of the notion of ‘comprehensive.’ As this review has shown CSE falls short in considering factors that affect the extent to which young people can safely explore, understand and navigate their sexualities, particularly LGBT+ youth, young women and young people in conflict affected areas. It is crucial then to ensure that CSE as an approach is grounded not only in promoting abstract notions of 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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