

Sex education and coeducation in adolescence: perspective of families, teachers, and adolescents

Educación sexual y coeducación: perspectivas de las familias, el profesorado y la población adolescente

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ABSTRACT

Sex education from a coeducational perspective contributes to the comprehensive development of adolescents and promotes a more just, egalitarian, and inclusive society. This research, consisting of two sequential studies, uses a mixed-method paradigm that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. The aim of the research was to analyse the onset and duration of romantic relationships that take place during adolescence, as well as to study in depth how sex education is approached in homes and schools in Castilla-La Mancha, from the perspective of teachers, families and adolescents. The first study's sample comprised of 1840 adolescents, while the second study's sample consisted of 109

adolescents, 11 teachers, 6 fathers, and 4 mothers. Although romantic relationships are common during adolescence, the results show that the sex education provided in homes and educational centres is not adapted to the needs and requirements of adolescents. The dominant approach to sexuality in the family is the risk model, while teachers tend to support more comprehensive educational models. However, in the absence of rigorous and age-appropriate information, adolescents often turn to other sources of information outside the control of education, including the internet and peer groups. This highlights the need for a comprehensive sexuality education through the two main socialisation spaces.

Keywords: sexuality, sex education, affective relationships, romantic relationships, adolescence

RESUMEN

La educación sexual desde el enfoque de la coeducación contribuye al desarrollo integral de la adolescencia y promueve una sociedad más justa, igualitaria e inclusiva. Esta investigación, estructurada en dos estudios secuenciales, está basada en un paradigma metodológico mixto que combina el enfoque cuantitativo y el cualitativo. El objetivo ha sido analizar el inicio y la duración de las relaciones románticas que tienen lugar en la etapa adolescente, así como profundizar en la forma de abordar la educación sexual en los hogares y en los centros educativos de Castilla-La Mancha, a través de la perspectiva de profesorado, familias y adolescentes. La muestra del primer estudio está formada por 1840 adolescentes; la muestra del segundo estudio, por 109 adolescentes, 11 docentes, 6 padres y 4 madres. Los resultados evidencian que, aunque la participación en relaciones románticas es una práctica habitual en la adolescencia, la educación sexual que se proporciona en los hogares y centros educativos no se adapta a las necesidades y los requerimientos de la población adolescente. El modelo de abordaje de la sexualidad que predomina en el ámbito familiar es el modelo de riesgo, mientras que el profesorado suele apoyar modelos educativos más integrales. No obstante, ante la falta de información rigurosa y adaptada a estas edades, la población adolescente suele recurrir a otras fuentes de información que escapan al control educativo, entre las que se encuentran Internet y los grupos de iguales. Esto subraya la necesidad de un abordaje integral de la sexualidad en los dos principales espacios de socialización.

Palabras clave: sexualidad, educación sexual, relaciones afectivas, relaciones románticas, adolescencia

INTRODUCTION

Sexuality is a dimension or essential component of human beings that is present throughout life and that manifests differently based on age. It encompasses aspects such as knowledge of the human body, sex, gender, sexual orientation, identity, love, diversity, pleasure, health, reproduction, affection and power (UNESCO, 2018). This dimension arises from the interaction of multiple factors, ranging from biological and psychological to sociocultural and ethical, and expresses itself in how people are, feel, think and act (Pan American Health Organization and World Health Organization, 2000).

One distinctive feature of adolescence is the emergence and establishment of romantic relationships (Collins et al., 2009), although the ways of relating in this stage have changed in recent decades (Flores-Hernández et al., 2021). The concept of romantic relationships refers to various voluntary interactions that are mutually recognised by the parties and are typically characterised by emotional intensity, displays of affection and sexual behaviour (Collins et al., 2009). Academic literature suggests that romantic dating can be considered a normative behaviour in the adolescent stage in the Western context (Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002). The use of the Internet and social networks have expanded the available spaces for the search and emergence of romantic relationships, extending them beyond traditional settings, such as schools or peer groups (Tienda et al., 2022). The opportunities to engage in such relationships may be greater with the possibilities offered by the Internet. In this context of normativity, there is some consensus on the importance of romantic relationships in adolescent development (Brar et al., 2023; Collins et al., 2009); however, there are many discrepancies regarding the age at which they should begin (González et al., 2021).

Seiffge-Krenke (2003) found that at 13 years old, 40% of adolescents had a romantic partner, at 15 years old, 43% had a partner and at 17 years old, 47% had a partner. The average duration of romantic relationships varied with age and were longer at 17 years old (11.8 months) than at 15 years old (5.1 months) and 13 years old (3.9 months). However, research suggests that romantic and sexual relationships in adolescence are starting earlier. González and Molina (2018) conducted a study with adolescent women who had initiated romantic relationships and found that half (50.1%) had started their romantic relationships at 13 years or earlier, 48.3% between 14 and 16 years old and only 1.7% between 17 and 19 years old. According to the Youth Institute (2021), 59% of Spanish youth aged 15 to 19 have had sexual relations with or without penetration (52% with penetration and 7% without penetration), with the average age of first sexual experience being 16.2 years. Considering that romantic and sexual relationships often begin at some point in adolescence, it becomes essential for educational institutions and households to

address relationships, in particular, and sexuality, in general, from an educational and comprehensive perspective (Barriuso-Ortega et al., 2022; Calvo et al., 2018; Carirote, 2007; Ferreiro, 2017; García-Vázquez et al., 2014; Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021; UNESCO, 2018, 2022; UNESCO and UNFPA, 2023a; Venegas, 2013, 2017).

Romantic and sexual relationships in adolescence are shaped by socialisation and cultural learning (Cerretti and Navarro-Gúzman, 2018). However, education and socialisation are not neutral, as they have the potential to perpetuate social inequalities or drive transformations (Martínez, 2016). Especially in the last two decades, various transformative educational proposals have emerged that are focused on the comprehensive approach to sexuality. Sexual education has been given various names depending on the country and context; currently, the most internationally accepted term is 'Comprehensive Sexuality Education' (CSE), as used by UNESCO (2022). CSE involves a continuous, gradual and comprehensive educational process based on scientific evidence about sexuality, which can be carried out in both formal and non-formal settings (UNESCO, 2018):

It is a process based on a curriculum to teach and learn about the cognitive, emotional, physical, and social aspects of sexuality. Its goal is to prepare children, girls, and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being, and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and understand their rights throughout life and ensure they protect them. (UNESCO, 2018, p. 16)

CSE assumes comprehensive education in terms of the breadth of content and topics, thereby moving away from traditional, moralistic and abstinence models that show a narrow and exclusionary view of sexuality (Leung et al., 2019; UNESCO and UNFPA, 2023a, 2023b). CSE incorporates a transformative and holistic vision that not only addresses the biological aspects of reproduction, risks and diseases but also includes all aspects surrounding sexuality in a progressive, contextual and age-appropriate manner (UNESCO, 2018). Therefore, sexuality education must embrace diversity (UNESCO, 2023) as well as gender equality and human rights (Haberland and Rogow, 2015; UNESCO, 2018, 2022).

The educational approach to sexuality can be classified into four models (UNESCO, 2014): the moralistic model, the risk model, the integrative model and the development model. First, the moralistic or abstinence model focuses on teaching abstinence from sexual relationships until marriage, legitimising it for reproductive purposes. Second, the risk model focuses on preventing health problems related to sexual relationships by providing information on topics such as unintended pregnancies, contraceptives and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs/STIs). Third, the integrative model focuses on the right to comprehensive health, which is understood as a requirement for the wellbeing of citizens; it adds to the

topics of the previous model by incorporating topics such as exercising rights, affectivity, pleasure, gender equality and preventing gender-based violence. Finally, the development and wellbeing model focuses on learning to be, with a vision of sexuality that goes beyond health and the previous topics to promote the integral development of individuals throughout life within the framework of sustainable development and democratic participation for a fairer society (UNESCO, 2014).

In the Spanish context, sexuality education is generally carried out through 'affective-sexual education', which also falls within the framework of human rights and gender equality but emphasises a coeducational approach (Venegas, 2013, 2017). Coeducation seeks comprehensive socialisation without sexist stereotypes through the promotion of gender equality and sexual and emotional education; it also seeks to overcome gender roles and violence (Méndez et al., 2017). This approach has evolved conceptually over the years to incorporate new elements related to non-sexist education (Álvarez et al., 2019), such as sexuality, emotions and affections (Ferreiro, 2017). However, affective-sexual education is contextualised within the coeducational approach because it addresses the social and relational dimension that is part of sexuality (Venegas, 2017). This inclusion of the affective allows differentiation between traditional sexual education and affective-sexual education. The former focuses more on the biological dimension of sexuality (e.g., the human body, sexual organs and reproduction), paying particular attention to guidelines aimed at preventing unwanted pregnancies and STDs or STIs, while the latter incorporates the social dimension of affective and sexual relationships, addressing how power and social inequalities intersect with sexuality and affectivity (Venegas, 2017).

Using information obtained from focus groups in both urban and rural areas, García-Vázquez et al. (2014) analysed the opinions and proposals of teachers and students regarding sexuality education in schools. Their findings revealed that the sexual education activities conducted in schools (e.g., sessions, talks and workshops) were similar in both urban and rural areas and were well-regarded by teachers and students. They also found that the educational approach to sexuality was hindered by lack of time, inadequate teacher training, the difficulty of the topic and little institutional support and interest. Fernández et al. (2022) studied how sexual education and diversity are addressed in classrooms at different educational stages. Results showed that teachers consider it important to address sexuality in schools but that various obstacles prevent its approach, including training gaps, curricular and time constraints and fears associated with its nature as a socially taboo topic. Teacher preparation and support from the educational community can become facilitators of sexual education in schools (Walker et al., 2021), promoting teacher training that aligns with CSE guidelines (O'Brien et al., 2021; UNESCO, 2022) and greater collaboration with families (UNESCO and UNFPA, 2023a).

Braga and Alcaide (2010) employed a sample of teacher training students to analyse the sexual education provided by families and educational institutions. Results showed that the majority of the sample had received little or no sexual education; thus, the approach to sexuality in these contexts had been scarce or non-existent. Using qualitative techniques, Caricote (2008) found that families do not understand the comprehensiveness of human sexuality and tend to approach it with fear and taboo. García-Vázquez et al. (2012) conducted several focus groups in different secondary schools after the students had completed a sexual education programme to gather the opinions of students, families and teachers. The results of the study showed that teachers believe that these interventions require time, coordination and institutional support, while families are somewhat afraid to address sexuality at home because they lack knowledge.

Cerretti and Navarro-Gúzman (2018) conducted a quantitative research study to analyse the beliefs and attitudes towards sexuality of a sample of adolescents aged 16 to 18. Only 16.4% of girls and 32.9% of boys considered the main purpose of sexuality to be reproduction; thus, the majority were far from a moralistic conception of sexuality; however, the study also highlighted the presence of biases and insufficient knowledge on the topic. Lameiras et al. (2006) implemented a coeducational and sexual education programme with adolescents, which demonstrated an increase in knowledge and attitudinal change regarding sexuality and gender equality. However, the programme revealed certain reservations and limited involvement on the part of teachers and families. Similarly, an action research experience on affective-sexual education with adolescents in Granada found that sexuality is generally presented as a taboo topic in the family setting (Venegas, 2013).

Individuals create their own vision of sexuality based on the information they receive—whether implicitly or explicitly—from the environment in which they socialise (UNESCO, 2014). The information adolescents have about sexuality and romantic and sexual relationships comes from various sources (e.g., families, schools, peer groups, people in the environment and the Internet), but it tends to be distorted or insufficient (Caricote, 2008). The limited information reaching young people is generally confined to intercourse and its risks, thereby overlooking the comprehensiveness of sexuality (Calvo et al., 2018). Given the taboos surrounding sexuality and the scarcity of comprehensive sexual education, various agents have gained prominence as sources of information during adolescence and youth, such as peer groups, the Internet and pornography (Alonso-Ruido et al., 2022; Roldán, 2022; Vélez, 2022).

The objectives of the research are to analyse the initiation and duration of romantic relationships during adolescence and to delve into how sexual education

is addressed in homes and educational institutions in Castilla-La Mancha based on the opinions of teachers, families and the adolescent population.

METHOD

Design

The research is based on a mixed-method paradigm that combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. A structured sequential strategy was employed in two phases or studies, with the results of the first study (quantitative) used for the development of the second study (qualitative). The first phase involved the administration of a structured questionnaire to students in educational centres in Castilla-La Mancha. The data collected through the questionnaire were used to design the question script for the second phase, which involved conducting in-depth interviews with families and teachers as well as discussion groups with adolescents from the educational centres that participated in the first study.

Participants

The first phase of the research (quantitative study) used a representative sample of 1,840 students in the third and fourth years of Compulsory Secondary Education (ESO) in the Autonomous Community of Castilla-La Mancha. By ages, 46.2% of the students were between 12 and 14 years, and 53.8% were between 15 and 18 years. The average age was 14.67 years ($SD = .89$). By gender, 49.9% were boys, and 50.1% were girls. The sample was obtained through stratified random sampling that into account the provinces (Toledo, Cuenca, Guadalajara, Albacete and Ciudad Real) and the size of the municipalities where the educational centres were located (urban, semi-urban and rural). The sampling assumed a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 2.2% for an approximate sample of 40,000 students enrolled in the third and fourth years of ESO.

The second phase of the research (qualitative study) used a sample of 109 adolescents, 11 teachers and 10 families. The selection of participants was done through intentional sampling in the same educational centres as the first phase. As shown in Table 1, fourteen discussion groups were conducted with adolescents, and 21 in-depth interviews were conducted with teachers and families.

Table 1
Characteristics of Participants in the Second Phase of the Research

Interviews with Teachers	Sex	Age	Specialty
EP1	Female	35	Spanish Language and Literature
EP2	Male	31	Physical Education
EP3	Female	41	History and Ethical Values
EP4	Male	32	Mathematics
EP5	Female	26	English
EP6	Male	33	English
EP7	Female	57	Spanish Language and Literature
EP8	Female	45	Spanish Language and Literature
EP9	Female	43	Geography and History
EP10	Male	39	Physical Education
EP11	Female	49	Therapeutic Pedagogy
Interviews with Families	Sex	Age	Occupation
EF1	Female	41	Administrative
EF2	Male	52	Commercial
EF3	Female	58	Educational Counsellor
EF4	Male	47	Educational Counsellor
EF5	Female	48	Administrative
EF6	Male	41	Nursing Assistant
EF7	Female	47	Administrative
EF8	Male	49	IT Professional
EF9	Male	47	Police
EF10	Male	35	Builder
Discussion Groups with Adolescents	Sex	Age	Number of Participants
GD1	Boys	3rd ESO	7
GD2	Mixed	3rd ESO	8

Discussion Groups with Adolescents	Sex	Age	Number of Participants
GD3	Mixed	3rd ESO	9
GD4	Girls	3rd ESO	8
GD5	Boys	3rd ESO	8
GD6	Mixed	3rd ESO	8
GD7	Girls	4th ESO	8
GD8	Boys	4th ESO	7
GD9	Mixed	3rd ESO	12
GD10	Boys	4th ESO	6
GD11	Girls	4th ESO	8
GD12	Mixed	4th ESO	6
GD13	Mixed	2nd ESO	7
GD14	Girls	2nd ESO	7

Procedure

The research team developed the structured questionnaire for the first phase and conducted random sampling to select educational centres in Castilla-La Mancha. Contacts were provided by the Department of Education and the Institute for Women of Castilla-La Mancha. Educational centres received all information about the objectives and contents of the research. Data collection took place in the facilities of the centres. The information gathered was used in the creation of the script for the in-depth interviews and discussion groups in the second phase. Interview dates were scheduled based on the availability of adolescents, teachers and families. Discussion groups and interviews were recorded and transcribed by the research team. Both studies ensured anonymity and had the relevant informed consents. In compliance with ethical aspects of scientific research, both research studies obtained approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Alcalá (CEI/HU/2019/39 and CEIP/2021/3/069).

Instrument

The quantitative phase collected information at a single point in time through a self-administered questionnaire consisting of custom-made questions that addressed sociodemographic characteristics (gender, age, school year, province and size of the residence municipalities) as well as variables related to romantic relationships: Have you had a partner? (yes/no); Do you currently have a partner? (yes/no); What is the duration of the longest romantic relationship you have had? (in months).

The qualitative phase also collected information at a single point in time but used interviews and discussion groups as data collection techniques. A script of thematic blocks was developed, but the questions and their order were not predetermined; the research team guided the conversations towards the topics of interest but allowed participants freedom in responding. The collected data were analysed in the form of verbatims or literal phrases.

Data analysis

The questionnaire data were analysed using the statistical programme SPSS (version 24), while the interview and discussion group data were analysed using the programme ATLAS.ti (version 22). In the first phase, descriptive statistics (frequency and mean) and comparative analyses (Chi-square, Student's t-test and one-way ANOVA) were employed. In the second phase, an analysis of verbatims by categories was conducted: 1) social changes in sexuality; 2) addressing sexuality in the family; 3) addressing sexuality in educational centres; and 4) seeking information about sexuality in adolescence. Verbatims display a series of codes that must be considered to interpret the results. First, all verbatims include the interview or discussion group number (see Table 1), the participant's gender and a number replacing the name (e.g., TeacherEP1, FatherEF2, or Girl8GD7). Second, parentheses with ellipses indicate a cut in the sentence, ellipses indicate a pause while speaking and text in square brackets incorporates a note or clarification.

RESULTS

Study 1: Quantitative research

Participation in romantic relationships is a common practice in adolescence. Nearly six out of ten adolescents in Castilla-La Mancha have had at least one partner, with no difference based on gender (56.7% girls and 57.7% boys; $\chi^2 = .16$, $p = .691$). However, romantic experiences varied based on age and the size of the residence municipality. The percentage of adolescents who had initiated their romantic lives significantly increased with age (see Table 2). A higher percentage of 17–18 year-old students have had a partner (89.8%) compared to 14 year-old students (50.3%) or 12–13 year-olds (42.2%) ($\chi^2 = 77.13$; $p < .001$). In addition, although the differences were small, a higher percentage of students in urban areas (60.1%) compared to semi-urban areas (54.1%) and rural areas (57.6 %) have had some romantic experience ($\chi^2 = 6.25$; $p = .044$).

The differences extended to having a partner at the exact moment of completing the questionnaire. The percentage of adolescents involved in a romantic relationship at that moment increased significantly with age (see Table 2), with 11.9% of 12–13 year-olds having a partner compared to 19.1% of 15 year-olds and 32.2% of 17–18 year-olds ($\chi^2 = 27.68$; $p < .001$). Regarding the size of municipalities, a lower percentage of adolescents in rural areas (9.1%) compared to semi-urban areas (19.3%) and urban areas (17.8%) had a partner at the moment they completed the questionnaire ($\chi^2 = 6.16$; $p = .046$).

The data indicate that romantic relationships in adolescence are generally brief, although there is considerable variability as the duration of an individual's most stable relationship ranges from one month to a year. As shown in Table 2, among students aged 14 to 16, the duration of the longest romantic relationship is very similar, with an average close to three-and-a-half months. The most notable differences are found when comparing groups at the age extremes, that is, 12–13 year-olds ($M = 2.32$ months; $SD = 1.28$) and 17–18-year-olds ($M = 4.84$ months; $SD = 2.98$), where variability is larger ($F = 2.92$, $p = 0.21$). On the contrary, the duration of romantic relationships does not seem to be affected by the size of municipalities ($F = .34$; $p = .715$): rural areas ($M = 3.38$ months; $SD = 2.88$), semi-urban areas ($M = 3.44$ months; $SD = 2.58$) and urban areas ($M = 3.61$ months; $SD = 2.66$).

Table 2*Romantic Relationships in Adolescence According to Age*

	12–13 years	14 years	15 years	16 years	17–18 years	Statistical
Percentage of adolescents who have had some romantic relationship	42.2%	50.3%	59.5%	73.9%	89.8%	$\chi^2= 77.13^{***}$
Percentage of adolescents who had a romantic relationship when answering the questionnaire	11.9%	14.2%	19.1%	25.8%	32.2%	$\chi^2= 27.68^{***}$
Duration of the longest romantic relationship they have had (in months)	2.32	3.56	3.55	3.42	4.84	F= 2.92*

Note: *p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.

Study 2: Qualitative research

Social Changes in Sexuality

Families perceive adolescent romantic relationships as brief and sporadic, lacking the commitment seen in adult relationships. They acknowledge the significant role of social media in current relationship dynamics. In line with the first phase findings, they are aware that romantic and sexual relationships often commence at early ages. Consequently, parents agree that adolescents should receive appropriate sexual education, although opinions vary on what is deemed suitable at these ages.

A couple of years ago, [my child] had a partner, at around 12 or 13 years. A couple of months, three months, around that, but nothing more. And I asked, and [they] said, 'No, I [haven't had sexual relations]'. And I asked, 'But your classmates, have they?' And [they] said yes, that some of [their] classmates have started their sexual life... The issue is that the levels of adolescents have progressed so much that, well, with my age, starting a sexual life at 15–16 was early, but now it's not early. [MotherEF1]

Because from my age to theirs, everything has turned upside down. So, before, at seventeen or eighteen, you were just starting to figure things out. Now, at thirteen and fourteen... [FatherEF9]

The early onset of romantic and sexual relationships is not the sole reason for addressing sexuality in adolescence. The interviews and discussion groups reveal that despite societal progress towards values such as tolerance, gender equality and respect for sexual diversity, gender inequity still permeates romantic relationships. Adolescent discourse also indicates the persistence of gender-based violence and discrimination against the LGBT community.

Relative to other groups this year [at school], there have been [cases of] harassment due to gender and also due to sexuality [TeacherEP4].

It's true that there are perfectly normal people our age who are quite homophobic. I mean, although supposedly, that should be more or less accepted today because it's not about accepting anything; it just is, and that's it. But many people are still against it. Or comments that, when you hear them, you're like, 'Well, I don't know where that person came from' [Girl7GD3].

There's still domestic violence [referring to violence against women] [Boy2GD10].

Addressing Sexuality in the Family

The prevailing educational model for addressing sexuality in the family is the risk model (UNESCO, 2014). Sexuality is primarily approached to prevent or address health issues related to sexual relationships, with a focus on risks such as unwanted pregnancies and STIs/STDs. However, integrative and developmental models also surfaced in family interviews, incorporating themes such as consent, pleasure, self-esteem, respect, affections, sexual orientation and gender violence.

Yes, I do think [we provide adequate sexual and emotional education] because whenever we've talked, well, even my husband, who has talked to them, has explained a bit about condoms and all that. I've even told my son that if he ever has a partner and she gets pregnant, the first thing he should do is tell me and his father. I think we do talk openly about the topic as well [MotherEF1].

I've always told [names of his son and daughter]: 'You have to respect yourself, and you're free to enjoy your sexuality as you want, when you want, and how you want'. ... The truth is, I have two wonderful children, what can I say, but, well, they'll start, and I'm already ahead. 'Well, [daughter's name], when you're older, this will happen to you, and I don't know, you have to know and take precautions...' I personally don't mind that my daughter or my son, when the time comes, enjoy their sexuality, damn it, yes, you can enjoy it, and you do. It's just that you have to educate them to respect themselves [FatherEF6].

The sexual education provided at home generates diverse perspectives, not only regarding the adopted educational models but also in the willingness or intention to address sexuality with children. Three educational profiles emerged based on parents' predisposition to discuss these topics at home: families taking the initiative in sexual education and trying to create an atmosphere of trust (consistent profile); families not openly addressing sexuality but willing to discuss it when asked, thus shifting the responsibility to their children (moderate profile); and families avoiding or outright not addressing sexuality (evasive profile). While some of these profiles consider sexuality a taboo, they do not necessarily align with a moralistic educational model based on abstinence and the reproductive purpose of sexuality. Regardless of their defended model, families have varying degrees of willingness to address sexuality based on factors such as embarrassment, educational level or trust with their children.

We can talk about many things, but that kind of conversation, no [MotherEF5].

Here [referring to the father's house] we always told him that he could talk about whatever he wanted and that there was no problem. And that the day he wanted [to talk about it], the day it needed to be addressed, it would be addressed, and that's it. But when it came time to address it, he had already talked about it with his mother [referring to the mother's house] [FatherEF9].

I understand that, yes, parents should have those talks with their children, but I'll explain, sometimes that's complicated. Many times it's complicated because, for example, no one has talked to me about anything, and I've learned everything by myself at school or wherever, like most people. But, of course, I think that should also be done by people who have studied for it. That is, in school, have a class where they can explain it better than parents because many times on such occasions, the child doesn't want to talk to the father or mother about it. Or says, 'Yes, yes, okay'. And then, who knows if they understood or not [FatherEF10].

Discussion groups with adolescents corroborate what parents stated in interviews – some families provide sexual and emotional education, but not all. Sexuality is still perceived as a taboo topic for many families. Families that do address these issues tend to focus on the risks of emotional and sexual relationships and social media. In this context, the taboo is not only present for the parents but also extends to adolescent boys and girls; the discourse indicates that shame is a common feeling when discussing these topics at home. Findings suggest that when families are less willing to address sexuality and do not create a climate of trust, adolescents may perceive sexuality as a dark and shameful aspect of their identity.

Not with our parents. But if my parents just see a kiss on a soap opera, they already turn it off. They tell me, 'close your eyes'.... When they talk to you like that at that

age, around 11 or 12, it doesn't instil confidence in telling them, for example, that you have a girlfriend or something. Because just covering your eyes with a simple kiss already creates insecurity [Boy4GD1].

They've never talked to me about sex either [Boy7GD1].

My mother always tells me to be careful, and such... [Girl1GD2].

With parents, it's impossible because you imagine your father or your mother, and the world collapses on you. Because when I start talking with my father, I can already imagine... [Boy7GD5].

Addressing Sexuality in Educational Institutions

Teachers generally advocate for a more comprehensive approach to sexuality in adolescence, with their opinions and educational proposals falling between the integrative and developmental models (UNESCO, 2014). They place significant emphasis on the right to integral health and the importance of creating a society with greater equality and social justice. While the risk model is present in the collective imagination, the interviewed teachers believe it is essential to prevent STIs/STDs and make students aware of contraceptive methods. However, they assert that sexual education should be comprehensive and not limited to these topics. Teachers also express the need to encourage student reflection to correct distorted beliefs and prejudices surrounding sexuality.

When they come to talk about sexuality at school, last year was very funny in a tutorial I had because they asked who was a virgin and who was not. So, many boys, I don't know what, no, not me, teacher. Then, the next day, they told me about their experiences. They open up a lot to me because it's true that I also give them space. (...) So, those are the kinds of things, I think you need that personal connection with them because the kids... It's useless for them to say, 'We're going to teach you how to put on a condom!' Fine. And I'm in class laughing with my friends putting a condom on a piece of wood. I'm looking at the course thinking, 'Later they're going to ask me everything they didn't dare to ask them'. The girls are shocked; the boys, who have done it fifty times because they stole condoms from their fathers and put them on with their dicks normally down... I mean, it's true, that's how it is, there's nothing more. So, that's useless; what works for them is telling you what happens to them in sex [TeacherEP1].

I think they have such a mistaken idea of what sexual relationships are, that that also needs to be worked on. We also have a workshop on... affection. No, it's called the Workshop on Affective-Sexual Relationships. Normally, it's also given by the street

educator. This year, we were lucky to have a colleague with whom we also worked on diversity, and it's good to teach them that many of the things out there [on the Internet and social media] are lies. (...) It's good to talk to them about their sexuality, healthy affective-sexual relationships, the process... These workshops explain all that. Besides, they are very good, they are given in the first and second years, and there are others for the third and fourth years. But these first- and second-year ones explain things like what genitals are like, what changes adolescence is bringing to your body, what sexual relationships are like, at what moment each one of us has different developments. We talk a lot, which is very related to gender equality and sexual violence as well. Well, that, they shouldn't force you, and we also have several very interesting videos [to address sexual consent in affective-sexual relationships]. (...) This year, we gave a workshop on affective-sexual diversity, and we talked about, well, everything... about sexual diversity, and it was discussed in a two-hour workshop [TeacherEP9].

While comprehensive models of sexuality predominate in teachers' ideals, most feel that sexual education is not adequately addressed in educational institutions. Some teachers take the initiative and address sexuality in their classrooms, individually implementing these comprehensive models. However, interviews show that the curricular approach to sexual education is generally carried out through occasional workshops conducted by professionals from other institutions. This task does not typically fall on teachers. Moreover, the brevity of these workshops does not allow for an in-depth exploration of the comprehensive nature of sexuality.

Sex education is needed in schools, and I would currently ask for external agents. (...) For example, the youth information officer or the director of the youth information centre we have here, who is wonderful, [the woman's name]. She's a very approachable girl, who also has a son, and is more external to us, so she can be closer in some aspects and vocabulary [TeacherEP10].

Yes, from the Guidance Department, they also give talks of that type, especially with the younger ones, the first and second years of ESO [compulsory secondary education]. There is usually, I don't know if once a quarter, but yes, there are. People from associations related to the topic come and have talks with them in groups, and they orient them, answer their questions, listen to them, too... And inform them. And that's fine. Yes, but it should be something like what we were talking about before, that maybe they shouldn't be left alone once a quarter or a year, but since they have access to that kind of content every day [on the Internet and pornography], it should be dealt with in a more regular way, perhaps [TeacherEP6].

Adolescent discourses indicate that in dealing with doubts about romantic and sexual relationships, they sometimes feel more comfortable addressing sexuality in schools than in their homes. However, consistent with teacher views, they

believe that sexual education in educational institutions often involves sporadic workshops based on the risk model ('the condom talk', Boy4GD1) and is challenging to execute due to its content and the taboos surrounding these topics. Beyond these workshops, adolescents state that the approach to sexuality in educational institutions depends on the individual disposition of the teacher as well as the trust they have with the students.

It depends because then the talks are very complicated, and you have to know how to organise a sex education talk. Because then they say 'oh, ass', and everyone laughs. Or 'you have to do this and place it here and be careful', everyone laughs. So, you have to be very careful, and it's probably not easy to give a talk. Because maybe we, up to a certain point, are mature for that. Up to a certain point. But if they do it to a first-year [student] and... the first time they hear 'you have to do this and place it here and do', nothing, they laugh, it's impossible [Boy7GD5].

They understand you more [if it's a young teacher], in the sense that they talk more with you. But there are teachers who, maybe, you talk about sex with a teacher, and she gives you a report, and they can kick you out. They call you dirty or something like that. Maybe it's something that the teacher thinks is silly, but you would like to know [Boy5GD1].

Very little, the previous teacher [addressed different topics in class]. He is the one who guides us the most in everything. If we have to talk about sexual orientation, he has no problem; if we have to talk about equality, he has no problem. About anything, we have enough confidence to talk about anything [Boy7GD5].

Information Search on Sexuality

The adolescent population demands more sexual education. They not only have concerns but also lack training and hold distorted and biased beliefs about reality. They attempt to counteract this lack of education by seeking information through various available sources. Families and teachers are two of the most important sources, but they do not always appear in the adolescent imagination as the first to whom they should turn. Consequently, other socialising agents emerge as sources of information, including the Internet, friendship networks and other individuals in their environment. Therefore, the lack of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) at home and in educational institutions may contribute to seeking information through channels beyond parental and pedagogical control, such as peer groups and pornography.

My mother already told me things as they are, she was teaching me about life from a certain stage [Boy5GD1].

I haven't learned about these things from my parents; it has been from external people, with friends [Boy4GD1].

I've told my tutor most things this year, maybe I've had an issue, I don't know, with anything, a relationship... [Boy6GD12].

For example, [teacher's name] has been my tutor since 1st grade, and I have always told her everything because she conveys trust, and I tell her. So, she helps me [Girl1GD12].

By people, by your friends, by your friends who know about the subject [Boy8GD2].

Or by people who have also had that experience and, well, they tell you about it. So, you realise what you shouldn't do [Girl3GD2].

Anything with three Xs [referring to pornography] [Boy4GD5].

Those with experience, [they explain] what it's really like [to have romantic-sexual relationships]. The older ones tell you, and it has nothing to do with what comes in the videos. It's very different, not like 'hello, let's do it', no [Boy7GD5].

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The effectiveness of comprehensive sexuality education from an early age has been examined in various contexts (Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021). As an essential dimension of human beings, sexuality manifests in different ways at each stage of development (Caricote, 2008; UNESCO, 2018). Therefore, the educational approach to sexuality contributes to sustainable human development and democratic citizenship (UNESCO, 2014, 2022). Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is grounded in the entirety of sexuality, promoting a transformative and scientific approach within the framework of human rights, gender equality and inclusion (Haberland and Rogow, 2015; Leung et al., 2019; UNESCO, 2018, 2022, 2023; UNESCO and UNFPA, 2023a, 2023b). The implementation of CSE is particularly relevant during adolescence, as it is the stage when individuals initiate romantic and sexual relationships (Collins et al., 2009), often lacking the necessary knowledge and tools (Calvo et al., 2018). Therefore, this research has analysed how sexual education is addressed in families and educational institutions in Castilla-La Mancha.

The characteristics of romantic experiences in adolescence have varied over time (Flores-Hernández et al., 2021). The study by González et al. (2021) showed that although romantic relationships currently play a significant role in adolescent development, there is considerable variability not only in the age of initiation of these relationships but also in their number and duration. Academic literature indicates that romantic relationships begin in the early stages of adolescence (González and Molina, 2018; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003), with the percentage of adolescents and young people engaging in such relationships increasing with age (Youth Institute, 2021). The results of the current research align with this, as approximately half of the sample of adolescents in Castilla-La Mancha had initiated their romantic lives at age 14 or earlier, and this percentage progressively increased until ages 17–18. Furthermore, romantic relationships in adolescence tend to be brief, although the duration of relationships also increases with age (Seiffge-Krenke, 2003).

Information on romantic and sexual relationships in certain specific populations, such as rural populations, remains limited (Flores-Hernández et al., 2021). This research provides evidence that during adolescence, the size of the residential municipalities may have some influence on the initiation and duration of romantic relationships but is not a determining factor. The differences in the percentage of adolescents who had initiated their romantic lives in each of the analysed zones (urban, semi-urban and rural) were small, exceeding 50% in all three contexts. The most notable differences were found in the current relationship status at the time of questionnaire completion, where a lower

percentage of adolescents in rural areas had a partner compared to urban and semi-urban areas. In contrast, the duration of romantic relationships did not vary based on the size of the municipalities.

The interviewed families supported the quantitative data from the first study, as they believe that romantic relationships occurring in adolescence are brief and start at early ages. In line with other research (Tienda et al., 2022), families agree that the Internet and social media play a role in the emergence and establishment of such relationships. All groups (families, teachers and adolescents) concur that societal values surrounding sexuality and romantic and sexual relationships have changed. However, the discourse analysis reveals that these relationships are still influenced by inequality and oppression and that violence against women and LGBT individuals continues to be present today.

Educational models addressing sexuality determine the objectives, content, key topics, duration and approach of sexual education provided in different contexts (UNESCO, 2014). In this research, the prevailing model in the family context was the risk model since the approach to sexuality tended to be limited to contraceptive methods and health risks associated with sexual relationships. The main concerns of mothers and fathers were unwanted pregnancies, STIs/STDs and the dangers of social media. However, some families also addressed topics such as pleasure, consent, sexual diversity, respect and gender violence. Thus, albeit to a lesser extent, comprehensive models (integrative and developmental) were also present in the family context. Within educational institutions, while the risk model still persists, the perspective on sexual education presented by the interviewed teaching staff is more aligned with the principles of comprehensive sexuality education models (UNESCO, 2014), supporting a comprehensive and gradual approach to sexuality that can adapt to each stage of human development (UNESCO, 2018).

Coeducation advocates for a transformative type of education that moves away from sexist attitudes and promotes a society based on gender equality and social justice (Álvarez et al., 2019; Méndez et al., 2017). However, this requires coeducational actions to extend to emotions, affections and sexuality (Ferreiro, 2017; Venegas, 2013). Unlike traditional sexual education, which focuses more on the biological dimension of sexuality, affective-sexual education is framed within the coeducation approach because it encompasses the social-relational dimension implicit in sexuality (Venegas, 2017). In this regard, teaching staff and families who support the risk model would be more aligned with traditional sexual education, while those who advocate for comprehensive models in addressing sexuality would be more aligned with affective-sexual education. This is because they present a vision of sexuality that includes topics such as emotions, relationships, wellbeing, gender perspectives and access to rights.

Sexuality is not openly addressed in all families (Braga and Alcaide, 2010; Caricote, 2008; Venegas, 2017). Providing sexual education in homes not only depends on the educational model adopted by families but also on their predisposition to addressing sexuality. This standpoint has allowed the identification of three educational profiles: consistent, moderate and evasive. Families with a consistent profile take the initiative and openly discuss sexuality with their children, but this does not seem to be the norm (Venegas, 2017); families with an evasive profile represent the epitome of taboo by avoiding discussions of sexuality; and families with a moderate profile are aware of the importance of sexual education but do not take the initiative, thus assigning the responsibility for their children's education to their children. These latter two profiles indicate that sexuality is still perceived as a taboo in the family sphere, as suggested by previous studies (García-Vázquez et al., 2012, 2014; Venegas, 2013). Nevertheless, individuals learn and internalise attitudes and values about sexuality, even if the topic is not openly or directly addressed (Caricote, 2008; UNESCO, 2014). If families associate sexuality with fear, shame or danger, these values may be transmitted to their children.

Regardless of the model or approach adopted by educational institutions, their interventions addressing adolescent sexuality can be grouped into two types of programmes (Barriuso-Ortega et al., 2022): programmes integrated into the educational curriculum and programmes that are sporadically developed. The former are not limited to a specific time or a single action but seek a comprehensive approach to sexuality throughout the entire schooling period by integrating it across different subjects and within tutorial hours. The latter sporadically addresses sexuality with isolated actions that occasionally occur in specific subjects or during tutorial sessions. The findings of the current research indicate that the implementation of sexual education in educational institutions often takes place through sporadic programmes. This makes interventions integrated into the curriculum contingent on the willingness and personal commitment of the teaching staff. As highlighted by Fernández et al. (2022), non-explicit content of the official curriculum ends up becoming optional or voluntary. Therefore, if sexuality is not explicitly addressed in schools, students may acquire prejudices, biases and distorted beliefs through the hidden curriculum (UNESCO, 2014).

The focus group discussions reflect that the adolescent population demands more sexual education (Lameiras et al., 2006; Venegas, 2013). However, this education should not be a taboo until adolescence (Caricote, 2008) but rather a gradual process that starts at an early age and adapts to the needs of each successive stage (UNESCO, 2018). In many cases, if families and educational institutions are absent in this task or provide limited information, then their role as educators may be replaced by other agents (Venegas, 2017). In line with academic literature (Alonso-Ruido et al., 2022; García-Vázquez et al., 2014; Roldán, 2022; Vélez, 2022),

adolescent discourses highlight that peer groups, the Internet and pornography are recurring sources of information at these ages. In conclusion, it is crucial for families and educational institutions to provide sexual education that offers a comprehensive view of sexuality (Calvo et al., 2018; Caricote, 2008; Fernández et al., 2022; García-Vázquez et al., 2012, 2014; Goldfarb and Lieberman, 2021; UNESCO, 2014, 2018, 2022; UNESCO and UNFPA, 2023a) and aligns with coeducation principles (Barriuso-Ortega et al., 2022; Venegas, 2013, 2017).

The research provides relevant information on the current topic of sexuality education in adolescence, but it is not without limitations that should be considered: a) the analyses focus on specific aspects of sexuality, so the findings may not be generalisable to broader aspects; b) unlike the quantitative study, the sampling in the qualitative study was intentional, meaning the sample is not representative of the region; c) both quantitative and qualitative information was collected at a single point in time (cross-sectional design), so changes in opinions over time cannot be evaluated; and d) responses may be biased by social desirability even though measures were implemented to ensure a safe environment and the importance of truthfulness was explained.

In the future, research could be built upon the results of this work by evaluating the effectiveness of comprehensive sexuality education programmes integrated into the curriculum. Longitudinal designs could be developed to address attitudinal, relational and behavioural changes in the adolescent population. If the nature of the work allows, it would also be advisable to consider implementing participatory research approaches involving families and teachers in comprehensive sexuality education training programmes, thus expanding the impact of the training.

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