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Sex education in Greece: a content analysis of selected materials

Christina Androni 5784018
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Faculty of Behavioural and Social Sciences,
University of Groningen

Primary Supervisor: Lourens van Haaften
Second Assessor: John Exalto

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Abstract:

Introduction: Sex education extends beyond public health, engaging broader societal debates about gender, identity, and morality. In Greece, while institutional efforts to introduce sex education have increased, implementation remains fragmented and contested. Existing research has focused mainly on barriers to implementation, overlooking the content and messages conveyed in educational materials. This thesis aims to examine what messages sex education materials in Greece project about gender, sexuality, and emotions, and what kind of student they seek to shape.

Methodology: Using the frameworks of Foucault, Bacchi, Allen, and Hung, this study conducts a qualitative content and discourse analysis of three educational resources: the Institute of Educational Policy's (IEP) official curriculum, the Teaching Therapy blog, and the Lifeskills blog. The analysis considers both the language and tone of the materials, as well as topics that are absent or underrepresented.

Analysis: Key themes identified across the materials include a strong emphasis on safety and risk avoidance, minimal discussion of pleasure or desire, reinforcement of traditional gender and family roles, biological essentialism, and the promotion of emotional regulation.

Discussion: Sex education materials in Greece often frame sexuality as dangerous or risky, rather than as a natural and meaningful part of life. This approach may limit how young people understand themselves and their relationships. The thesis advocates for a more open, inclusive, and emotionally honest approach to sex education, one that affirms students' identities and better supports their development.

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Introduction

Sex education has been typically referred to as the informal and formal teaching of various topics such as sexual health, relationships, sexuality, consent and physical development (Goldman, 2011). Although usually presented in terms of public health, especially in regard to reducing "at-risk" behaviors such as teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STD's), yet sex education has always been about more than just health. The history and also the development of sex education are far more complicated.

Firstly, sex education programs were introduced in the early 1900s, mostly due to growing public health and sexual morality concerns in places that were becoming increasingly populated. Besides, sex education has also been affected by bigger events in history. The sexual revolution that took place in the 1960s and 70s, together with the feminist and LGBTQ+ movements and additional disputes for bodily autonomy and liberation, had a significant impact on redefining the goals of sex education. As a result, sex education is a debated area that mirrors evolving society norms, concerns, and goals around gender, sexuality, and also citizenship, rather than just being an impartial instrument for fostering individual well-being.

Greece's efforts to incorporate sex education into its national curriculum have been successful in recent years. Among the most notable efforts was the launch of the Skills Workshops (Εργαστήρια Δεξιοτήτων – Ergastiria Deksiotiton) at the end of 2021, which for the first-time featured sex education as a thematic area (Institute of Educational Policy [IEP], 2021). Even though the program was brief and not extensively institutionalized, it signaled a change in public opinion and policy, showing that the value of teaching children and adolescents about relationships and sexuality was being increasingly embraced (Savani, 2024). These developments in Greece are part of a broader global trend. International organizations such as UNESCO, WHO, and IPPF have been actively promoting Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) programs that are age-appropriate, inclusive, and grounded in human rights, as a core component of education systems worldwide (UNESCO, 2018; WHO Regional Office for Europe & BZgA, 2010).

At the same time, these changes have generated public discussion and controversy both internationally and in Greece. In Greece, as elsewhere, the expansion of sex education has been met with resistance, especially from religious institutions and conservative stakeholders (Kikis-Papadakis & Zacharos, 2016). Common anxieties focus on fears of prematurely sexualizing children or undermining traditional moral and family values. Therefore, the challenge of sex education exceeds the context of education. Morality, identity, and national culture are all negotiated in this disputed arena (Allen, 2008; Foucault, 1978). In light of this, the question of what sort of sex education is being promoted has become fundamental. Historically, sex education has had a complicated relationship with the Greek education system.

First proposed as early as 1964, it has never been implemented consistently or fully institutionalized (Sakellariou, 2020). In the 1980s and 1990s, pilot initiatives frequently started and then discreetly ended. In this fragmented landscape, sex education remained marginal, often treated as an optional or extracurricular topic. However, concerns about gender, consent, and sexuality have received more attention recently due to cultural and political shifts. The #MeToo movement, which gained traction in Greece in 2021, has highlighted sexual violence and gender-based inequalities, adding urgency to calls for more comprehensive and thoughtful approaches to sex education (Kitsou, 2022).

Academic research on sex education in Greece has primarily focused on barriers to implementation such as lack of teacher training, institutional hesitation, or social opposition (Zacharos, Kikis-Papadakis, & Karavida, 2014). While this work is important, it leaves an important question unanswered: what do the existing materials actually teach? What messages are being conveyed today to young people by the materials that are now accessible on sex, gender, bodies, relationships, and emotions? In short, what kind of sex education is being offered in Greece? This is not a simple question.

Scholars have shown that sex education can take very different forms, each based on different ideological and pedagogical assumptions. Some programs take a risk-avoidance approach, focusing on abstinence, safety, and self-control, often treating sexuality as something dangerous or disruptive (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Others follow a more liberal model, aiming to equip

students with factual information about biology, contraception, and health, with an emphasis on personal responsibility. Then there are others, aligned with critical or emancipatory approaches, including topics like pleasure, consent, gender identity, power, and emotions, aiming to empower students to think critically about sexuality and social norms (Allen, 2011; Kehily, 2002). Each of these different models reflect not only different teaching strategies but also different visions of the ideal sexual subject and future citizen.

Literature review

Scholars commonly distinguish three main approaches of sex education, namely: a conservative, a liberal, and an emancipatory model (Lowe & Maguire, 2019).

The conservative approach often emphasizes maintaining traditional family values and avoiding risks. It promotes heteronormative gender norms and places a high priority on abstinence, which assists in preventing pregnancy and STDs (Ringrose & Renold, 2012). As a result of social discomfort with sexuality and control, this method frequently ignores discussions on pleasure, sexual diversity, and more extensive assumptions of consent (Allen, 2008).

On the other hand, the liberal model promotes straightforward, science-based information about anatomy, contraception, and safe sex practices. It encourages individual responsibility and informed choices, aiming to equip young people with the knowledge to make safer decisions about their sexual health (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Yet, while more inclusive than the conservative approach, it often treats sexuality as a private matter and rarely engages with issues of power, desire, or social inequality (Kehily, 2002).

The emancipatory model goes further to question prevailing conventions by introducing topics such as pleasure, consent, gender diversity, power dynamics, and emotional well-being (UNESCO, 2018),. This approach views sexuality as a rich and multifaceted aspect of citizenship and identity, and it aims to enable youth to challenge societal conventions and take control of their sexual lives (Kehily, 2013; Allen, 2008).

The Greek context presents particular challenges. Research by Giannouli and Christodoulou (2017) shows how teachers frequently maintain a balance between promoting progressive sex education and honoring traditional cultural beliefs, which can occasionally result in cautious or

limited conversations. The content and delivery of sex education are also heavily influenced by cultural and religious standards, particularly when it comes to subjects like pleasure and sexual variety, as noted by Fylaktou and Theodoropoulou (2018). These conflicts create an unbalanced environment where comprehensive sex education is partially implemented and faces resistance.

By encouraging students to adopt particular emotions and ethical positions that are in line with societal ideals, sex education not only imparts knowledge but also shapes social identities and emotional bonds, as explained by Ruyu Hung's (2017) concept of affective citizenship within the emancipatory framework. This is complemented by Louisa Allen's (2008) discourse on erotics, which emphasizes sexuality as a source of pleasure and desire and calls on educators to acknowledge the sexual subjectivity of young people and encourage critical thinking about sexual norms.

Despite rising worldwide consensus on the advantages of comprehensive sexuality education, Greece remains a questionable site where social conservatism and institutional barriers influence what and how it is taught (Kikis-Papadakis & Zacharos, 2016; Sakellariou, 2020). Many studies have investigated these challenges, but few have attempted to look at the actual content of educational materials, the words, values, and emotions they deliver. In order to bridge this gap, the current study examines Greek sex education materials and how they construct knowledge and emotions about sexuality in learners. It also aims to reveal how issues like risk, consent, and identity are portrayed, not just as neutral facts, but as socially constructed "problems" that reveal underlying assumptions. In contrast to other research that mostly concentrated on implementation issues or public resistance, the purpose of this study is not to assess the effectiveness of sex education, but rather to investigate how it provides meanings about sexuality, identity, gender, and emotional development. Therefore, we aimed to address the different kinds of subjectivities generated by language and silences around sexuality in Greek sex education.

Research questions

The current study looked at the content and pedagogical approach of sexual education materials aimed at various age groups, with a particular emphasis on how effectively and inclusively these materials deliver crucial information around sexual and reproductive health. This study's primary

goal was to find out what type of sex education is promoted in Greece. Accordingly, we aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How inclusive are the materials regarding gender, sexual orientation, and identity, and what values or assumptions about these aspects are embedded in the content?

2. How are gender roles portrayed, and what implications does this have for affective citizenship in terms of emotional and social rights related to sexuality?

3. What themes (e.g., consent, contraception) are emphasized, and which are excluded?

4. How are concepts such as risk, pleasure, and desire addressed, silenced, or framed within the materials?

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a Foucauldian discourse analysis as a framework to investigate how sex education is portrayed in Greek school materials. This discourse analysis focuses on how language and tone shape students' perspectives regarding sexuality, gender, emotions, and citizenship. Consequently, this approach is based on the concept that curricula reflect specific values and principles, therefore they are not neutral. It contributes to recognizing the values and beliefs hidden inside instructional materials. We additionally used aspects of Carol Bacchi's *"What's the Problem Represented to Be?"* technique to look into how different social concerns are understood. Bacchi's approach assists in the understanding of how sex education materials impact students' feelings, behaviors, and interpretations of themselves and others, in addition to providing knowledge.

We used purposive sampling to identify relevant sex education sources for our analysis, thereby focusing on materials officially endorsed by the Greek Ministry of Education, alongside popular educational blogs that support sex education implementation. This selection aimed to cover a

comprehensive range of sex education content used in Greek classrooms, including official curricula, teacher and parent resources, and adaptations of international materials. The format and target audience of each primary source differed; as some were aimed at parents, others at educators, and others directly address children and teenagers. These sources, which are publicly accessible on the websites of the corresponding organizations, contain lesson plans, teaching manuals, short videos, and other materials that may be downloaded. All materials were first published in Greek and for the needs of this study were consequently manually translated to English.

Source Selection

The first source included was the official sex education curriculum and is put together by the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP) on behalf of the Greek Ministry of Education. It provides the official curriculum under the “Live Better” or "Ζω Καλύτερα (Zo Kalitera)," program. It is intended for use in public elementary and secondary schools and includes lessons on emotional health, personal safety, and body awareness. This curriculum is built around four major chapters that seek to meaningfully relate to students' current lives and goals for the future. In the first chapter, "Improve Your Quality of Life," students are encouraged to consider how their decisions impact their well-being, which covers subjects including eating a nutritious diet, driving safely, understanding their emotions, and learning about their bodies, including sex education. The remaining chapters, "Protect the Environment," "I Show Interest and Act," and "Innovation and Creation," help students learn how to be environmentally conscious, get involved in their communities by being socially conscious and inclusive, and investigate the possibilities of the future through STEM, creativity, and career exploration.

The second source is the Teaching Therapy Blog (2011), which was created by educators and psychologists, to further the sex education initiatives offered by the Greek Ministry of Education. This blog was chosen for analysis as it serves as a pedagogically flexible, semi-official supplement to the official curriculum. The launch of the Skills Labs program coincided with the creation of this blog in 2021. Although the blog primarily focuses on students between the ages of 5 and 12, it also provides additional materials for parents, teachers, and speech therapists. These consist of easily accessible materials such as interactive exercises, instructional videos, books, and booklets.

The third source began publishing content in 2022. This was the website Lifeskills.blog **which** was developed by educators who modified Alberta Health Services' Canadian Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) materials to meet Greek educational requirements. A variety of topics that are important to students are covered in the blog, including relationships, emotional health, puberty, personal hygiene, and personal safety. It offers teachers prepared lesson plans and useful tools to help parents to assist with vital discussions at home. Students in elementary and early secondary school, about ages 6 to 14, are the target audience. The curriculum for younger students focuses on fundamental themes like body awareness and safety, gradually progressing to more intricate issues like relationships and emotional well-being as students get older.

Data Analysis

We followed an iterative analysis process, involving a constant back-and-forth between the data and the theoretical frameworks. We began with open readings of the selected materials to gain an understanding of their tone, language, and content structure. Recurring themes became apparent as we familiarized ourselves with the content better, especially in the way sexuality was presented, the subjects that were emphasized or left out, and the type of learner or child that was being envisioned.

At this stage, we used Carol Bacchi's "What's the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) approach to further analyze the sources, which enabled more pointed questions about how the materials construct certain "problems." While we did not apply all six of Bacchi's questions rigidly, we focused on three:

1. *What is the problem represented to be?* In most of the materials, sexuality is presented as a risk or danger that requires management. Lessons emphasize safety, boundary-setting, and emotional control.
2. *What assumptions underlie this representation?* The texts often assume that children are passive, vulnerable, and in need of protection. These assumptions resonate with Foucauldian notions of power, where institutions regulate populations by shaping behaviors and emotional norms. They also reflect Hung's concept of affective citizenship, in which students are shaped not only intellectually but emotionally—learning which feelings, behaviors, and responses are considered acceptable.

3. *What is left unproblematic?* Just as important as what is present is what is absent. Sexual pleasure, queer identities, diverse family forms, and questions of gendered power are frequently omitted or silenced. These absences contribute to shaping what is considered "appropriate" knowledge and experience.

Based on the above, we next started coding the data derived from the above analyses. The coding process combined deductive codes drawn from the theoretical framework and research questions with inductive insights gathered from frequent engagement with the materials. Some thematic topics, such as risk and heteronormativity were identified in advance, while others were refined or discovered through the data itself. The analysis examined how gender roles and family norms are described, how diversity and LGBTQ+ topics are included or avoided, how risk and safety are constructed, and the way that sexuality is framed, especially in relation to emotion and pleasure.

All documents, including lesson plans, blog entries, and instructional videos were examined closely for their meanings, with special attention to language, tone, and emotional effect. These themes were not simply imposed in advance but developed in conversation with the texts and informed by ongoing engagement with contemporary sex education literature.

In this sense, the research process was neither purely inductive nor deductive. Instead, it was iterative and dialogic, shaped by a continual exchange between empirical observation and theoretical reflection. The final categories offer both an analytical lens and a response to the study's core research questions: What kind of sex education is being offered? What assumptions and values underpin it? Which topics are emphasized, and what is left out?

Ethical considerations - Reflexivity

Each researcher's perspective, influenced by their values, background, and experiences, may have introduced subjectivity into the interpretation of the findings, which is acknowledged as part of the ethical reflection.

Analysis

Overall, the Lifeskills blog, the IEP curriculum, and the Teaching Therapy blog all presented sexuality in a way that needs to be managed and controlled, rather than being explored or

understood in a more positive manner. This was not just about what is said, but also about how certain topics are not mentioned and how students are positioned as responsible citizens who must control their emotions and behaviors in order to comply with society standards.

By integrating Foucauldian discourse analysis alongside the WPR questioning, we moved beyond surface-level description to analyze how the studied materials produce norms, subjectivities, and emotional expectations. This interpretive process led to the development of thematic categories within the discourse analysis. In the paragraphs below we elaborate on each of the themes when answering the respective research questions.

1. How are concepts such as safety and risk framed within the materials?

Theme: Safety and risk

Sex and sexuality are often considered risky issues related to all three sources. The repeated use of terms like “danger,” “protect,” and “unsafe” ("Abuse and Harassment," Lifeskills.blog, 2022d, p. 5) suggests that sexuality is something students need to manage carefully, particularly in ways that reduce risk. The emphasis is mainly on how to keep safe, prevent harm, and defend oneself and others. Sexuality is presented as something to regulate and to be cautious about, rather as something that we can understand or explore. For example, the Lifeskills blog advises students to *“Always tell a trusted adult if someone makes you uncomfortable”* ("Friendship and trust," Lifeskills.blog, 2022a, p.24). This teaches kids to be on guard and alert for danger. Another example from the same blog is a lesson called *“My Body Belongs to Me,”* where students are taught to say “No!” and run away if someone touches them in a way that feels wrong. These lessons send a clear message, and that is that your body is something you need to protect.

The idea that is portrayed, is, that sexuality comes with risk, and students need to constantly watch out for threats. The IEP curriculum is even more direct, saying things like, *“Sexuality can be harmful if not approached safely”* ("My body: a miracle that I love, care for, and protect," Institute of Educational Policy, 2023c, p. 42). This suggests that sexuality itself is dangerous unless handled the right way. The Teaching Therapy Blog talks about things like *“unsafe touch” and being cautious around strangers* ("5th session – Media and the internet: self-protection and self-respect,"

Teaching Therapy, 2007). In an exercise taken from the Teaching Therapy blog, students have to identify if a touch is "safe" or "unsafe" based on various kinds of scenarios.

For instance, it is considered safe to receive a hug from a parent, but it is considered unsafe when a stranger attempts to hold your hand. This teaches children to recognize danger, but it also conveys the idea that being near or touching others is most likely risky. Children learn from this to be extremely cautious with their bodies, especially in social situations. Instead of helping kids in understanding their emotions or learning how to form healthy relationships, it places more emphasis on risk and danger.

The message that appears is: sexuality is risky, and the main job of the students is to stay safe. In all of these cases, it is evident that students are not encouraged to understand sexuality in a comprehensive way, instead they are taught to manage it, avoid danger, and follow the instructions and rules they are given. This connects with Foucault's idea that schools and institutions control people by teaching them how to control themselves, especially their bodies and desires.

Theme: Biological essentialism

The idea that bodies and identities are biologically determined appears frequently in the materials, particularly on the Lifeskills Blog. Lessons on puberty and reproduction are taught with basic facts, leaving little space for variety or complexity. For example, a puberty lesson states: "Boys grow hair on their face, girls get periods"("Coping with puberty," Lifeskills.blog, 2022a, p. 22). This kind of framing assumes a binary view of gender, where everyone fits precisely into one of two categories, male or female, and where bodily changes during puberty are tied exclusively to that binary. There is no mention of intersex bodies or gender diversity.

Additionally, the IEP curriculum includes *diagrams* that label "male" and "female" bodies with specific parts, like a penis for boys and a vagina for girls ("Getting to Know the Human Body," Institute of Educational Policy, 2023d, p.8). There is no mention that some people might be born with bodies that do not fit these exact categories, or that not everyone who has a penis is a boy, or a vagina a girl. The message translates to the fact that sex and gender are the same and that they are fixed from birth. This kind of teaching leaves out intersex,

transgender, and non-binary people, and it suggests that there is only one “normal” or “acceptable” way to be male or female.

Students are expected t*o match physical changes to "boys" or "girls"*("Becoming a teenager," Lifeskills.blog, 2022a, p. 18) in an exercise. For instance, "*voice gets deeper"* goes under "boys," while *"breasts develop*" goes under "female." This type of activity gives the impression to the students that there is only one "right" method for these changes to occur. Children who might not “accurately” fall into those categories, such as transgender or non-binary children, or those whose bodies develop in unusual ways are clearly left out. This overlooks the true range of puberty experiences and promotes a limited perception of gender.

2. How are gender roles and identities constructed or addressed?

Theme: Normative constructions of gender and sexuality

Sub-Theme 1: Binary gender representation

Across the materials, boys and girls are shown as completely different, like they come from two separate worlds. For example, the IEP curriculum has an activity where students are asked to “*write down how boys and girls are different during puberty* ("Untamed Horses," Institute of Educational Policy, 2023a, p. 19). This kind of task does not just point out differences, it teaches kids to see themselves and each other as fitting into two fixed boxes, boy or girl. From Foucault’s view, this is not just harmless, but it is a quiet way of shaping how kids think and act. It trains them to believe that being male or female means certain things, and that they have to follow those rules. Instead of allowing for variety or change, these lessons tell students there are only two ways to be.

Sub-Theme 2: Heteronormativity

Besides pushing strict roles for boys and girls, the materials also assume that love and attraction only happen between a boy and a girl. For example, the Teaching Therapy Blog talks about relationships using phrases like *“a boy and a girl fall in love,”* ("11th session – Our group of friends – Interpersonal and intergender relationships," Teaching Therapy, 2007) and never shows any other kind of couple. This reflects something called heteronormativity, the idea that being

straight is the “normal” or expected way to feel. As Louisa Allen points out, sex education is not just about facts and knowledge, it also shapes how students feel and what kinds of relationships they think are possible. When only straight couples are shown, kids learn not just what love is, but what kind of love is seen as “acceptable” or real in school.

3. What themes are emphasized, and which are excluded?

Theme: Emphasis on friendship over romantic or sexual emotions

Across the materials, emotional relationships are often framed in safe, platonic terms. For example, a *Lifeskills Blog* lesson on “*healthy relationships”* focuses on how *“good friends treat each other kindly,”*("Relationships," Lifeskills.blog, 2022e, p. 30) emphasizing respect and kindness but avoiding any mention of romantic or sexual feelings. This keeps the emotional world of students very contained, focused on politeness and care, but not on desire, attraction, or the “messiness” of adolescent feelings. From the perspective of *affective citizenship* (Ruyu Hung), this emphasis on friendly behavior over emotional complexity constructs the “ideal” student as emotionally stable, non-disruptive, and unlikely to explore beyond safe emotional zones. It is a version of citizenship that avoids risk, difference, and embodied intensity.

Theme: Moralistic overtones in emotional tone

There are particular classes with an evident moral message, particularly on the Teaching Therapy Blog. Titles such as *"Making the right choices about your body*" ("6th session – Relationships between boys and girls," Teaching Therapy, 2007) give the impression that relationships and sexuality are about doing what is "right" or "wrong." The lectures imply that there are only several “correct” emotions and behaviors, rather than helping children to be creative or think critically. According to Foucault, this demonstrates how schooling shapes children's emotions as well as their actions. It teaches kids to monitor and regulate both their bodies and emotions so that they align with social norms.

Theme: Personal development and well-being

An overarching objective that was analyzed throughout all three materials was for children to develop emotionally and navigate the challenges of adolescence with safety and respect. Young

children learn to understand and navigate interpersonal and social relationships. The lesson plans and sessions help young people recognize signs of abuse and harassment, understand how to prevent them, and protect themselves effectively.

Theme: Body boundaries and "good touch / bad touch"

The materials studied also tend to teach young kids about bodily autonomy. For example, the Teaching Therapy Blog has activities like "*circles of trust*" ("3rd session – Who do I want to be like?" Teaching Therapy, 2007) that helps children think about who can or can not touch them. These lessons are important because they help kids spot and tell someone if they experience something wrong. But the focus is mostly on sorting touches into "good" or "bad" without exploring how touch, desire, or consent can be more complicated, especially in close relationships. From Ruyu Hung's point of view, this kind of teaching encourages kids to control their feelings and bodies to fit with rules about safety and following adults, instead of helping them understand emotions or how to navigate relationships with care and respect.

Themes not mentioned in the materials:

Theme: Lack of mention LGBTQ+ identities

Perhaps the most striking pattern is silence. In places like the Lifeskills Blog, there is a complete avoidance of any mention of LGBTQ+ identities. Every time a family is featured in a lesson on the Teaching Therapy blog, it always consists of a mother, a father, and children. Two moms, two dads, or other types of families are never mentioned. This subtle message indicates to children that only certain kinds of families are significant or "normal," and it excludes everyone who doesn't fit into that description. Students who identify as LGBTQ+ or who have LGBTQ+ family members might feel as though they do not belong.

There seems to be no discussion of same-sex attraction, gender diversity, or non-traditional families. This absence sends a message that these lives are not part of the official story of growing up. According to Foucault, what gets excluded from official knowledge is just as important as what gets included. Erasing queer identities maintains the illusion that only certain kinds of bodies, relationships, and experiences are legitimate. Ruyu Hung's concept of *affective citizenship* also helps explain what is at stake. These materials construct an ideal student citizen who is cisgender,

heterosexual, and emotionally aligned with traditional norms. Anyone who does not fit that mold is left out emotionally, socially, and educationally.

Theme: Contraception and sexual health

Although the materials sometimes describe "*protecting yourself,"* they do not really explain how to do that. For example, the IEP curriculum uses the word "protection" ("My body: a miracle that I love, care for, and protect," Institute of Educational Policy, 2023c) but does not mention anything about condoms, birth control, or what exactly students should be protecting themselves from, like pregnancy or STIs. This leaves a big gap in what students actually know about taking care of their sexual health.

According to 2010 research, the majority of Greek teenagers are interested in learning more about contraception. As schools do not teach enough about sex, many people learn about it through online sources (Tsimtsiou et al., 2010). According to Iliadou et al. (2023), a large number of Greek university students have reservations and limited knowledge regarding contraception, revealing that educational systems are losing an opportunity to address a topic that is important to students. It is worth noting that the two research projects were conducted 13 years apart, and yet the outcomes seem similar.

Consequently, by not sharing this information, students do not get the power to make smart choices about their own bodies. This also proves how there is a worry about giving young people too much control over their sexuality, especially around topics that some adults find sensitive or difficult to talk about.

Theme: The absence of pleasure and erotics

Perhaps one of the most striking aspects of the materials was what was not said; the absence of discussions about sexual pleasure. In all of the analyzed materials, there is little to no mention of sexual desire, pleasure, or emotional fulfillment. Silence surrounding the more positive or enjoyable parts of sexuality promotes a limited perspective that views sexuality as something to be controlled and regulated rather than appreciated.

On the Lifeskills blog, there are lots of resources about *handling negative feelings or what to do if something makes you uncomfortable* ("Personal Values and Decision Making," Lifeskills.blog, 2022f, p. 29). However, there is nothing about how to feel or enjoy sexual pleasure in a healthy relationship. For example, kids learn to notice when they feel uneasy, but they do not hear anything about the good feelings or positive experiences that can come from close relationships.

In the IEP curriculum, for instance, *intercourse is mentioned only in the context of reproduction* ("Untamed Horses," Institute of Educational Policy, 2023a). There is no discussion of sexual desire, emotional intimacy, or positive physical experiences. The IEP curriculum talks about puberty and body changes, but only in terms of hygiene and taking care of yourself. It explains the physical changes but never talks about the emotions or pleasure that might come with those changes. The focus is on practical things, like *how to keep your body clean* ("Red shoes," Institute of Educational Policy, 2023e, p 3) without mentioning natural feelings like attraction or curiosity that many kids have during puberty.

The Teaching Therapy Blog talks a lot about *healthy relationships* ("11th session – Our group of friends – Interpersonal and intergender relationships," Teaching Therapy, 2007) but does not really create space to talk about sexual desire or how relationships can be more than just about respect and consent. Not only is it wrong to exclude pleasure, but it also serves to keep the discussion focused and under control. For instance, one lesson ("9th session – Understanding and managing my feelings," Teaching Therapy, 2007) emphasizes the need of teaching kids to set boundaries and say "no," yet it never discusses how relationships may also feel good or be emotionally fulfilling.

Students are not given the opportunity to explore the positive, emotional, and rewarding aspects of sexuality because the materials are centered on keeping them safe. This silence is a form of control that ignores aspects of intimacy and pleasure in favor of simply discussing safety and risk, two aspects of sexuality. This is indicative of a larger issue in society, where discussing sexual pleasure is frequently avoided, particularly when interacting with young people.

According to Louisa Allen, sex education that ignores desire and pleasure cultivates in young people the idea that these parts of sexuality are either wrong or irrelevant. Sex is not made safer by this absence but rather, it makes it more difficult for children to understand or discuss their own emotions openly and honestly.

Theme: Consent and bodily autonomy: A limited and cautious framing

The *Lifeskills Blog* emphasizes refusal and protection: *"If someone tries to touch you in a way you don't like, you must say no and tell an adult."* ("Abuse and Harassment," Lifeskills.blog, 2022d, p. 9). This framing teaches consent as a defensive act, something to use when boundaries are crossed, rather than as an ongoing, mutual process of communication within relationships.

Similarly, the *Teaching Therapy Blog* introduces concepts like *"circles of trust"* to help young students distinguish who is allowed to touch them. These lessons support the development of basic bodily autonomy and are especially appropriate for early learners, but they remain focused on external regulation and safety, rather than emotional complexity or interpersonal negotiation. Notably, the *IEP curriculum does not mention consent at all*. There is no direct teaching about personal boundaries, bodily autonomy, or the ethics of touch and communication. Considering that the curriculum claims to support students' well-being, this absence is noticeable.

4. Forming affective subjects: The ideal student in curriculum.

This part looks at how the curriculum doesn't just teach facts about sexuality, but also shapes how students are expected to feel and act emotionally. Using the idea of affective citizenship (Hung, 2016), it shows how the materials create an image of the "ideal student" , someone who remains careful, and responsible when it comes to feelings about sex. For example, the official curriculum from the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP, 2020) highlights qualities like self-control and respect, encouraging students to be responsible and cautious. By focusing on these emotional lessons, the curriculum teaches students certain ways of feeling and behaving that fit what society expects.

Comparative observations

When comparing the *IEP curriculum*, the *Lifeskills Blog*, and the *Teaching Therapy Blog*, we observed both recurring themes along with noteworthy differences in their approaches to sex education. In the section below, we elaborate on each of these differences.

Tone and emphasis

The tone of the IEP curriculum is formal and instructive. It presents knowledge as scientific facts and directs pupils toward appropriate conduct, with a primary focus on safety, health, and regulations. There is hardly any space left for free communication or genuine concerns. Despite the Lifeskills Blog's emphasis on safety, the content is more relaxed and approachable. It clearly employs simpler vocabulary and was created with younger children in mind. Taking a somewhat different direction the Teaching Therapy Blog addresses parents and teachers and provides guidance on how to have conversations about the body, relationships, and emotions. It places more emphasis on making moral decisions and providing emotional support.

All three materials are lacking when it comes to representing diverse sexual and gender identities. The *IEP curriculum* and *Teaching Therapy Blog* talk only about heterosexual relationships and traditional families, usually a “mom and dad.” The *Lifeskills Blog* also assumes this norm, though it sometimes offers more flexible examples that could allow for broader discussions. Still, none of the materials directly address LGBTQ+ individuals, same-sex relationships, or gender diversity. These identities are completely left out, which sends the message that they are not part of the "normal" or accepted view of relationships.

Flexibility

The official IEP curriculum is prescriptive and highly organized. It provides precise guidelines for what teachers should cover and sets clear expectations. Lessons can hardly be tailored to students' interests or requirements because of this. On the other hand, the Lifeskills Blog provides greater freedom. Teachers can make use of its resources anyway they see fit since they are more flexible. Rather than offering predetermined lessons, the Teaching Therapy Blog offers resources and guidance, allowing parents and teachers to choose the most appropriate use of the content based on the situation.

Shared themes

Despite their differences, all three sources repeat certain key ideas. They all strongly emphasize *safety*, *personal responsibility*, and *emotional control*. They teach children to be careful, respectful, and to follow social rules. There is a consistent focus on traditional gender roles and behaviors, for

example, separating boys and girls when talking about puberty. One of the most striking similarities is what they leave out, none of the materials talk about *sexual pleasure*, *attraction*, or *desire*. These important parts of human sexuality are completely ignored. As a result, sex is presented not as something that can be emotional or enjoyable, but mainly as something to be managed, controlled, or avoided.

Conclusion

This study examined three key sources of sex education materials currently used in Greece; namely the official IEP curriculum, the Lifeskills blog, and the Teaching Therapy blog. Across all of them, a clear pattern emerged: sexuality is mostly approached through the lens of safety, risk management, and self-control. While these priorities are understandable given concerns around public health and child protection, they also leave out important aspects of what it means to grow up and understand oneself as a sexual being. Topics like pleasure, emotional connection, and desire are largely absent, and students are often encouraged to manage not just their actions but also their feelings in ways that align with adult expectations of caution and restraint.

Seen through the lens of Foucault's (1978) work on discipline and Hung's (2020) concept of affective citizenship, these materials can be understood as shaping not only what young people do, but how they are expected to feel. Sex education becomes a space where emotional regulation is taught alongside biological facts where being a "good" student means being careful, quiet, and self-controlled.

The materials also reflect long-standing cultural norms in Greece, particularly around gender and family. Traditional roles are often reinforced, and there is little mention of LGBTQ+ identities or relationships. This mirrors broader social and religious influences that continue to shape how sexuality is talked about or not talked about in schools (Gerouki, 2010; Grigoropoulos, 2023).

When compared with international guidelines for comprehensive sexuality education such as those promoted by UNESCO and the WHO, it is clear that Greek materials are still more closely aligned with conservative or liberal models that prioritize biological information and risk avoidance. Emancipatory approaches, which focus on inclusion, gender equality, and empowering students to

understand themselves in complex and meaningful ways, are largely missing (Allen, Rasmussen, & Quinlivan, 2017).

In the end, this analysis shows that a particular kind of sex education is being promoted in Greece, one that emphasizes safety, conformity, and control, often at the expense of openness and diversity. By focusing on what is actually taught in the classroom rather than on public debates or controversies, this study highlights how sex education contributes to shaping young people's understanding of themselves and others. It also points to the need for ongoing reflection and dialogue, about what we include, what we leave out, and what kind of futures we imagine for the students who are learning about sexuality for the first time.

Implications for future sex education reforms in Greece

Sex education in the aforementioned materials focuses mostly on avoiding risks, behaving morally, and controlling emotions. It does not really talk about pleasure, personal identity, or expressing yourself. As a result, students might only see sexuality as something to be controlled and managed, not as something to enjoy, to explore safely or understand deeply. This may construct their idea of sexuality to be very limited, mainly about staying safe and not getting hurt, while missing out on the positive and joyful sides of relationships and intimacy. To support students better, sex education in Greece could grow in the following proposed ways:

Make it more inclusive

While the Greek materials tend to rely heavily on emotional safety and social norms, frequently neglecting more open or diverse conversations about sexual identity and desire, Lamadoku Attila et al. (2023) stress the importance of sex education in striking a balance between emotional development and honest, culturally sensitive discussions about sexuality. Right now, there is little to no mention of LGBTQ+ people or diverse families. Future lessons could reflect the real world by including different kinds of relationships, genders, and identities.

Make it compulsory

Today sex education remains an optional course in the Greek public-school curricula, however it would be of great benefit for it if it became a mandatory class where students learn about themselves, their bodies, their identities and those of others. Solórzano Salas (2019) shows how

comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) can help young people grow up healthier, more confident, and better informed. In a world full of unreliable sources (social media, internet), sexual education provides scientific and trustworthy information (Alexopoulos, 2024).

Talk about pleasure and desire

Sexuality is not just about avoiding risks, it can also be a healthy, joyful part of life. Students should be given space to learn about attraction, curiosity, and what makes relationships feel good in a safe, age-appropriate way. Recent research highlights significant gaps in students' knowledge regarding sexual health, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

According to Kourouni et al. (2023), most students reported learning about sexual health from the internet and peers rather than formal education settings. By incorporating open discussions around pleasure and desire, it helps normalize sexual feelings and reduces internalized stigma, which supports better mental and emotional health, while empowering young students.

Encourage critical thinking

While teaching topics around sex education, educators may also promote critical thinking skills for students. Sex education should help children challenge gender stereotypes, understand how society shapes them, and develop their own beliefs rather than directing them to stick to conventional norms (Ollis & Harrison, 2015)**.**

Support teachers

According to a study, Fakinos (2010) found that many teachers have expressed the fact that they feel unprepared or lack the necessary training to deliver comprehensive sexual education effectively. It is essential for educators to receive training and ongoing support in order to talk about these topics honestly and safely with their students. This could also take place by forming a collaboration with health professionals which could result in providing a more comprehensive and accurate sex education.

Update policies

A need for national policy reforms is advisable, in order to integrate comprehensive sexuality education into the school curriculum. Policymakers and educational bodies should prioritize the inclusion of CSE as a subject in preservice teacher training programs (Soultatou & Athanasiou,

2024). Policies should give clear guidance on the guidelines they publish, not just vague advice about protection or health.

Parental involvement

Open communication with parents and communities would serve to address misconceptions and concerns around sex education and help reduce taboos. As a result, children would be more open to discuss openly with their families about issues that concern them like relationships or issues they might be dealing with. When families become part of the conversation, learning becomes meaningful and more holistic (Epstein, 2011). This way, the knowledge does not remain in the school environment, but travels beyond the classroom.

Discussion

When we look closely at the sex education materials used in Greece, especially those from the Institute of Educational Policy (IEP) and supporting resources like the Teaching Therapy and Lifeskills blogs, it becomes clear that the approach is a mix between conservative and liberal styles. These materials focus heavily on teaching values like respect, responsibility, and emotional awareness, while providing some scientific information about bodies and health. However, they tend to avoid deeper or more challenging topics such as sexual pleasure, diverse identities, or critical reflections on gender.

According to the *Palgrave Encyclopedia of Sexuality Education* (2024), sex education typically fits into three broad approaches: conservative, liberal, and emancipatory. The conservative approach emphasizes abstinence, traditional family values, and safety, often avoiding topics such as pleasure or LGBTQ+ identities. The liberal approach focuses on providing clear, accurate information about sexual health, anatomy, contraception, and consent to help young people make informed choices. Meanwhile, the emancipatory approach goes beyond facts and values to encourage critical thinking about social norms, power, identity, and pleasure, aiming to empower students to take control of their own bodies and relationships.

In the Greek context, the curriculum leans toward a conservative-liberal combination. While it includes some important factual knowledge, sexuality is mostly framed through moral and emotional lenses, highlighting safety and social responsibility. This means that important topics

that would align with an emancipatory approach, such as questioning gender norms or exploring sexual desire are largely absent. The curriculum promotes a version of sexuality that is “safe” and socially acceptable, but not one that encourages young people to critically engage with the complexities and diversity of sexual experiences.

This is what the *Palgrave Encyclopedia* describes as a risk-focused and moralizing discourse, which is common in contexts where social and cultural pressures limit open discussions of sexuality. In Greece, the influence of traditional values and the Orthodox Church likely contributes to this approach. Thus, while Greek sex education materials provide valuable information and promote emotional skills, they fall short of delivering a comprehensive or emancipatory education. This limits young people’s opportunities to learn about sexuality in ways that include pleasure, diversity, and personal agency, key aspects for a well-rounded understanding of sexual health and identity (Allen, Rasmussen, & Kemp, 2024).

What is left unproblematic?

Citing Bacchi’s inquiries, one of the most significant silences in the IEP materials is the complete absence of pleasure, curiosity, or desire as valid parts of sexual experience. Instead, sexuality is presented through interpersonal relationships, responsibilities, and moral or emotional implications. The body is positioned as a potential site of risk, rather than a source of knowledge or enjoyment.

This is additionally supported by Louisa Allen's criticism of school-based sex education, which she refers to as the "missing discourse of desire"(2007). Allen argues that excluding pleasure and eroticism conveys the notion that sexuality is only acceptable in limited moral or emotional contexts, usually found in adult heterosexual relationships, and should never be experienced or explored freely by young people.

Lindgren (2019) additionally contributes to the framing of two of my main themes, the reinforcing of conventional gender and family norms and the lack of pleasure and erotics. According to her study, feminist educators have pushed to make room for more diverse perspectives on relationships and the body for over a century. However, many current materials such as blogs like Lifeskills and

Teaching Therapy, often rely on simplified or medicalized ideas that do not address pleasure, desire, or diverse identities.

Foucault reminds us that what is excluded from discourse is just as significant as what is included. In the case of sex education, the omission of pleasure, desire, or bodily curiosity functions as a form of disciplinary silence that shapes what students can think or say about sexuality. These exclusions shape what is sayable, thinkable, and knowable for students, essentially regulating sexuality through absence. This idea is also supported by the publications of the International Planned Parenthood Federation-European Network (2006), which highlight that sexuality education across Europe tends to focus on risks and safety while overlooking desire and emotional aspects.

What's the problem represented to be?

Activities such as "interview your grandparents," gently establish the concept of family history and emotional connections while avoiding an open discussion of sexuality.

However, there is a striking lack of discussion on major topics for example consent, contraception, and STIs. International organizations such as the World Health Organization and UNESCO believe these to be essential components of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) (UNESCO, 2018; WHO, 2010). These issues are either ignored or presented in an insufficiently broad way within the IEP framework, frequently connected to vague notions of responsibility or respect. Although values are valuable, they cannot replace the accurate, scientific information that young people need in order to live safely.

The question being asked by the curriculum seems to be: "What kind of person should the student become?" and the answer leans heavily toward being respectful, empathetic, and emotionally intelligent. Yet, this often comes at the cost of excluding practical knowledge about bodies, rights, and sexual health. The result is a curriculum more focused on moral development than on equipping students with critical sexual knowledge.

Rethinking norms and emotions in sex education

To put the Greek sex education materials into context, it is interesting to also look at the Swedish "sex-map" tool that Cardell and Lindgren (2024) provide. In order to encourage young people to think and speak transparently about their personal experiences and feelings surrounding sexuality, the sex-map aims to meet them where they are. It views sexuality as a diverse, constructive, and emotionally meaningful phenomena. The Greek materials that I looked into, on the other hand, tended to stay on the safe side and concentrate on biological facts, risks, and mostly on conventional roles (boy-girl, mom-dad).

The *Teaching Therapy* blog materials implicitly reinforce traditional gender roles; however, they do not discuss them explicitly. Evidence of traditional gender role framing are books like "Το σώμα μου είναι δικό μου" (my body is mine) and "Πώς γίνονται τα μωρά" (how are babies made) often use gender binary language (for example “boys” and “girls” with corresponding body parts), without acknowledging variations in identity or body experience.

This represents what Foucault refers to as a *regime of truth*, a method of presenting information that appears objective and scientific but in reality, upholds particular standards, in this case regarding bodies and puberty. These resources serve in building students' understandings of others and themselves not only biologically but also socially and morally by presenting a single definition of "normal." What is lacking here is brought to light by Louisa Allen's idea of the discourse of erotics. The emphasis remains solely on controlling and labelling bodies rather than creating an environment where students may learn about the variety and complexity of their bodily experiences. There are solely facts, no space for emotions or differences. In this manner, these resources help kids learn to "know" their bodies in ways that are strictly normative.

Pleasure and desire are largely not present, and there is little room for students to think about their identities or underlying emotions. We can understand how crucial it is to provide space for emotional and human connection in sex education, rather than merely imparting knowledge, by contrasting these two methods.

Whose experiences are (and are not) represented?

Another significant shortcoming in Greek sex education materials is the absence of LGBTQ+ identities, gender diversity, or alternative family structures. The curriculum implies that all pupils are heterosexual, cisgender, and raised in typical nuclear families. This makes many young people invisible, promoting a limited and exclusive definition of normality. The lack of coverage of these subjects is not only a content issue, but also an ideological one. As Ruyu Hung (2019) observes in her work on emotional citizenship, education institutions frequently encourage students to feel and behave in ways that are consistent with national or cultural standards. In this scenario, the ideal student is emotionally responsible, family-oriented, and follows dominant gender and sexual norms.

Culture, religion, and their role in sex education

To understand the barriers in Greek sex education, it is important to look at the wider cultural and political context. The Orthodox Church continues to have a strong influence on social norms and public education in Greece, which is reflected in the curriculum's moralistic and sentimental portrayal of sexuality (Tsakalos, 2018). Although Greece has passed several progressive legal reforms, such as legal gender recognition and civil unions for same-sex couples, these changes have yet to be meaningfully represented in school materials (Papageorgiou & Markou, 2022). Research by Antoniou (2017) shows how traditional family values also shape what is taught and accepted in schools, while Dimitriou (2020) points out that topics such as gender diversity and sexual pleasure remain sensitive and often avoided in educational settings.

Even more modern and flexible resources, such as Lifeskills.blog, offer interactive activities and cover some issues like gender stereotypes. Yet, they too stop short of engaging with queerness, fluidity, or non-normative sexualities. While more open in tone, the content still reflects the same cultural boundaries that restrict full inclusion.

There is a genuine conflict between traditional beliefs and contemporary educational policies. Many curriculum publishers and teachers tend to be concerned about offending conservative groups or parents (Gerouki.M, 2010). In order to avoid anything that can come across as "controversial," they frequently play it safe and concentrate on subjects like kindness, respect, and

emotions. Silence on those matters, however, is hardly a neutral decision. What young people learn about their bodies, relationships, and themselves is shaped by it.

Representation and silences: gender, identity, and emotion in Greek sex Education

What emerges from this analysis is a picture of partial, cautious, and emotionally oriented sex education. Students are encouraged to be kind, empathetic, and respectful, all worthwhile goals. Although at the same time, they are denied access to full, honest, and inclusive information about sexuality, gender, and health. Without education on consent, protection, or diversity, students may turn to peers, the internet, or social media to fill the gaps, and not always with accurate or safe outcomes. Worse, those who do not fit into the dominant narrative, LGBTQ+ youth, gender-nonconforming students, or even those simply curious about their bodies, may be left feeling isolated, ashamed, or confused (Allen, 2004, p. 115).

Sex education should not just seek to minimize harm, it should help students better understand themselves and others, gain confidence, and make educated decisions. Currently, the materials utilized in Greece do not fulfill this standard. They represent a greater cultural resistance, one that limits young people's opportunities to learn about sex and identity in a healthy, open, and inclusive manner.

Lindgren's (2019) study invites us to reflect on the notion of sex education. It rejects the common misconception that sex education is all about obeying rules and avoiding risks by explaining how an early Swedish guidebook encouraged children to connect with their emotions and ethical issues. Greek resources, on the other hand, tend to focus only on traditional roles and control, leaving little room for reflection or one's identity. In light of Lindgren's work, it is clear that sex education may provide an environment for young people to calmly and thoroughly explore their identities and relationships; this is something that modern Greek materials ought to do a better job of encompassing.

A step in the right direction: Constructive developments in the curriculum framework

Even though the sex education materials from the IEP, *Teaching Therapy Blog*, and *Lifeskills.blog* do not cover everything they should, each of them brings something good to the table. The IEP

materials do a great job focusing on feelings and relationships. They teach students about respect, kindness, and empathy, things that are very important when building healthy relationships. Helping kids understand their emotions and how to care for others is a good first step toward understanding sexuality in a deeper, more meaningful way. Additionally, by including family activities like interviewing grandparents, the IEP curriculum encourages students to connect with their families and start conversations about love, life, and values. This makes the topic feel more natural, especially in communities where talking about sex can feel uncomfortable.

The Teaching Therapy Blog offers a practical touch. It provides materials for teachers and parents to help children learn how to form polite, safe relationships. While it does not get into the complexities of sex, it does educate kids how to set boundaries, communicate effectively, and be mindful of their emotions. These strengths are useful not just in romantic relationships, but also in other types of friendships and interactions. The blog's emphasis on emotional safety helps to foster a supportive atmosphere in which children may begin to think about relationships in a healthy way.

Then there is the Lifeskills.blog, which stands out for its exceptional creativity and interactivity. It includes engaging activities like quizzes, painting, and role-playing that encourage pupils to participate and think. Instead of memorizing facts, children may explore concepts, ask questions, and express their opinions. This type of hands-on learning helps children become interested and comfortable discussing relationships and emotions. Even if it does not cover every topic completely, it provides a welcoming environment for children to develop themselves and grow.

Overall, all three sources are geared toward helping children learn how to be kind, respectful, and emotionally aware. They teach young students key skills such as setting boundaries, communicating properly, and caring for others, all of which will help them create healthy relationships in the present and future. While there are certain gaps, such as a lack of discussion regarding consent, contraception, and other types of sexual identities, these resources provide students with a good starting point. They initiate the conversation, strengthen emotional abilities, and make learning about relationships simpler and more comfortable.

Limitations of the study

The materials themselves are the subject of this research rather than their actual classroom application. It does not represent how these courses are interpreted in practical settings or the voices of educators or learners. Additionally, only materials for younger students, not older high school students, are the focus, which influences the vocabulary and level of conversation on particular subjects. Despite this limitation, this study may provide insight into the broader messages that young people in Greece are likely to receive on sexuality, identity, and emotional life, by examining what is publicly available and promoted.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Source name	Type of source	Reference
IEP Platform	Official government curriculum	https://iep.edu.gr/el/psifiako-apothetirio/skill-labs/1658-3-seksoualiki-diapaidagogisi
Teaching Therapy blog	Educational Support blog	https://www.teachingtherapy.com/2021/09/blog-post.html
Lifeskills.blog	Adapted Comprehensive Sexuality Education Materials	https://lifeskills.blog/cse_edu_alberta_health_services/

Appendix II