

8.O. Oral presentations: Sexual and gender minority health

Abstract citation ID: ckae144.533
Skills and competences of sexuality educators. Evidences from a qualitative research in Italy

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Background: The scientific literature recognizes the strategic role of educators in sexuality education projects in schools. If, however,

there is often a discussion about the most effective professional figure (teachers, school experts or external experts), there is a little attention to the skills and competences that an educator should possess and to which he or she must be trained. Adopting a Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) approach, which is evaluated as the most effective, it is necessary to consider a skill set for educators that should not be limited to the knowledge in the area of sexual health promotion and risk prevention.

Methods: In order to build evidence-based competencies and skills, a qualitative study was conducted. A total of 72 educators involved in school-based CSE interventions in 4 Italian Regions, in 24 middle and secondary schools (68 classes), during 2 consecutive school years were enrolled. Before, during, and after the activities in the classrooms, qualitative feedback was collected, through reflective journals written by educators themselves. These data were analyzed through a qualitative approach, according to the principles of empirical phenomenology.

Results: The phenomenological evidences confirm the need to overcome the conception of educator as instructor equipped only with knowledge in the field of sexual health. It is considered fundamental to possess and develop pedagogical competences and skills, such as: caring attitude, teaching skills, theoretical awareness, capacity to manage the unexpected. Moreover, educators reported the necessity of an initial and continuous training on these dimensions considered as the most challenging.

Conclusions: The research confirms the complexity of the competency profile of CSE educators. Therefore, their professional development should include tailored designed multi-disciplinary training programs, with particular attention to the pedagogical dimension.

Key messages:

- Comprehensive sexuality education requires an adequate professional figure intended not as an instructor aimed only at risk prevention and health promotion, but as a real caring educator.
- Pedagogical skills and competences should be included in the training processes for sex educator, through adequate activities.