

**Exploring primary school sex education in
Greece: Policies and praxis**

Margarita Gerouki

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Policies and praxis

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Sukupuolikasvatus kreikkalaisissa alakouluissa: politiikkaa ja käytäntöjä

Tiivistelmä

Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee sitä, miten sukupuolikasvatus on nykyisin rakennettu ja toteutettu Kreikan koulujen ala-asteella. Neljässä julkaisussa tutkitaan seuraavia aiheita: (1) sukupuolikasvatuksen asema ja näkyvyys yhtenä osana terveystieteellisen kasvatuksen kehittämistä (2) tekijät, jotka estävät tai edistävät sukupuolikasvatusohjelman kehittämistä ja toteuttamista ala-asteella (3) miten sukupuoleen, seksuaalisuuteen, ihmisen kehoon ja seksuaalisuhteisiin kuuluvat kysymykset ovat visuaalisesti ja kirjallisesti esitetty ala-asteen oppikirjoissa (4) sukupuolikasvatuksen vaikutus opettajiin ja oppilaisiin, sekä (5) opettajien kokemukset ammattikuntana käsitellä seksuaalisuuteen liittyviä aiheita koulussa.

Tutkimus perustuu toisiinsa liittyviin alatutkimuksiin joissa on käytetty eri lähestymismenetelmiä. Erityinen, laadullinen ja määrällinen aineisto on kerätty ja analysoitu. Kyselylomakkeilla kerätyn alkuperäisen aineiston käsittelyä on jatkettu keräämällä ja analysoimalla kvalitatiivista aineistoa. Kvalitatiivinen aineisto on hankittu tutkimalla yhtä erityistä tapausta, eri tekstejä, haastattelemalla opettajia ja itsepohdiskelevan aineiston pohjalta. Alatutkimusten tulokset on esitetty yksityiskohtaisemmin tutkimuksen neljässä julkaisussa.

Yleisesti alatutkimuksissa todetaan, että sukupuolikasvatus opetustoimintana on marginaalisessa asemassa Kreikan ala-asteiden opettajien opetuskäytännössä, koska aihetta tuskin on mainittu opetusmateriaalissa, kuten oppikirjoissa. Kuitenkin monille opettajille, oppilaille ja heidän vanhemmilleen sukupuolivalistusohjelmista huolehtiminen voi olla merkityksellinen ja palkitseva tunne. Lisäksi opettajien kokemusten mukaan koulussa herää sukupuoliasioihin liittyviä kysymyksiä. Nämä kontekstuaaliset tekijät vaikuttivat opettajien toimintaan henkilökohtaisella ja ammatillisella tasolla.

Terveysindikaattorit Kreikassa todentavat väestönkuvan, joka kohtaa erilaisia seksuaalivalistukseen liittyviä ongelmia. Monet tutkimukset (tämä mukaan lukien) osoittavat, että erityiset standardit täyttävillä sukupuolikasvatusohjelmilla voi olla positiivinen vaikutus opiskelijan terveyteen ja hyvinvointiin.

Sukupuolikasvatuksen opettaminen on aina ollut kiistelty aihe. Sen onnistunut toteuttaminen Kreikassa vaatii asioista perillä olevia opettajia ja vastuullisia päättäjiä. Tämän tutkimuksen tuloksissa esitetään, että Kreikan ala-asteiden oppikirjojen sisältöä täytyy uudistaa, jotta niissä olisi tekstiä ja kuvia ihmisen kehosta ja seksuaalisuudesta, rohkaisemaan oppilaita olemaan mukana suunnittelemassa ohjelmien sisältöä ja menetelmiä ja antaa opettajille mahdollisuus keskustella kokemuksistaan.

Avainsanat: sukupuolikasvatus, ala-aste, Kreikka

Margarita Gerouki

Exploring primary school sex education in Greece: policies and praxis

Abstract

This study examines how sex education is currently developed and implemented in Greek primary schools. The four publications that comprise it explore the following themes: (1) the position and visibility of sex education as one of the topics for health education programme development; (2) the inhibiting and enhancing factors in the development and implementation of primary school sex education programmes; (3) how issues of sex, sexuality, the human body and romantic relationships are visually and textually represented in primary school textbooks; (4) the impact of sex education on teachers and pupils; and (5) teachers' experiences as practitioners who deal with sexuality-related issues at school.

The research was based on conducting multiple sub-studies using a mixed-methods approach. Specifically, qualitative and quantitative data were collected and analysed. The initial quantitative data that had been obtained by questionnaire was followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. The qualitative data were acquired by way of examining one particular case, various texts, interviews with teachers and self-reflective material. The results of the sub-studies are presented in a more detailed manner in the study's four publications.

In general, the sub-studies found that sex education as an educational activity occupies a marginal place within the instructional practices of Greek primary school teachers, since the subject is hardly mentioned in classroom material, such as textbooks. However, engaging in the provision of sex education programmes can become a meaningful and rewarding experience for many teachers as well as pupils and their families. Further, teachers' classroom experiences pointed to school settings as sexualized environments. These contextual factors and conditions nevertheless affected teachers' practices and perceptions on a personal and professional level. Health indicators in Greece provide a picture of a population that faces various sexual health related problems. However, as many studies (including this work) indicate, sex education programmes that meet specific standards can have a positive impact on students' overall health and well-being.

Sex education teaching has always been a controversial issue. Its successful implementation in Greece demands knowledgeable educators and responsible policy-makers. The findings of this study suggest that the content of Greek primary school textbooks needs to be revised in order to include texts and pictures that deal with the human body and human sexuality, encourage pupils to become involved in designing the content and methods of programmes and give teachers the opportunity to reflect on and discuss their experiences.

Keywords: sex education, primary school, Greece

Μαργαρίτα Γερούκη

Προγράμματα σεξουαλικής αγωγής στο ελληνικό δημοτικό σχολείο: πολιτικές και πράξη

Σύνοψη

Η παρούσα μελέτη εξετάζει τους τρόπους με τους οποίους σχεδιάζονται και εφαρμόζονται τα προγράμματα σεξουαλικής αγωγής στο ελληνικό δημοτικό σχολείο σήμερα. Οι τέσσερις δημοσιεύσεις που ολοκληρώνουν τη διατριβή διερευνούν τα παρακάτω θέματα: (1) τη θέση και αναγνωσιμότητα της σεξουαλικής αγωγής ως μία από τις θεματικές ενότητες της αγωγής υγείας· (2) τους παράγοντες που εμποδίζουν ή ενισχύουν την ανάπτυξη προγραμμάτων σεξουαλικής αγωγής στο δημοτικό σχολείο· (3) πώς τα σχολικά εγχειρίδια διαπραγματεύονται και παρουσιάζουν ζητήματα σεξουαλικότητας, εικόνας του σώματος, και των ρομαντικών σχέσεων· (4) την επίδραση εφαρμογής ενός προγράμματος σεξουαλικής αγωγής σε εκπαιδευτικούς και μαθητρίες / μαθητές· και (5) τις εμπειρίες των εκπαιδευτικών όταν διαχειρίζονται ζητήματα σεξουαλικότητας στην τάξη.

Η έρευνα ολοκληρώθηκε μέσα από πολλαπλές υπο-μελέτες χρησιμοποιώντας μια μικτή ερευνητική προσέγγιση. Δηλαδή, συλλέγοντας και αναλύοντας ποσοτικά και ποιοτικά δεδομένα. Τα πρώτα ποσοτικά ερευνητικά δεδομένα που αποκτήθηκαν με την εφαρμογή ενός ερωτηματολόγιο ακολούθησε η συλλογή και ανάλυση ποιοτικών στοιχείων μέσα από μελέτη περίπτωσης, ανάλυση επίσημων εγγράφων, καταγραφή συνεντεύξεων με εκπαιδευτικούς και προσωπικό υλικό. Τα αποτελέσματα των υπο-μελετών παρουσιάζονται στις τέσσερις δημοσιεύσεις του δεύτερου μέρους της παρούσας διατριβής.

Γενικά οι μελέτες αυτές έδειξαν ότι η σεξουαλική αγωγή ως εκπαιδευτική παρέμβαση είναι μια περιθωριοποιημένη σχολική δραστηριότητα των εκπαιδευτικών πρωτοβάθμιας στην Ελλάδα ενώ ελάχιστες αναφορές βρίσκονται στα σχολικά βιβλία ή σε άλλο εκπαιδευτικό υλικό. Παρόλα αυτά η ενασχόληση με προγράμματα σεξουαλικής αγωγής μπορεί να είναι μια ιδιαίτερη ικανοποιητική εμπειρία για τις και τους εκπαιδευτικούς, τους μαθητές και μαθητρίες και τους γονείς. Επιπλέον οι μαρτυρίες των εκπαιδευτικών κατέδειξαν το σχολικό περιβάλλον ως ένα πλαίσιο όπου οι μαθητρίες και μαθητές εκφράζουν τη σεξουαλικότητά τους. Οι τρόποι και το πλαίσιο μέσα στο οποίο αυτή η έκφραση λαμβάνει χώρα είναι δυνατό να επηρεάσει τις αντιλήψεις και απόψεις των εκπαιδευτικών τόσο σε επαγγελματικό όσο και σε προσωπικό επίπεδο.

Οι δείκτες σεξουαλικής υγείας στην Ελλάδα δίνουν την εικόνα ενός πληθυσμού που αντιμετωπίζει διάφορα σεξουαλικά προβλήματα. Επίσης πολλές μελέτες (συμπεριλαμβανομένης και της παρούσας) υποστηρίζουν ότι προγράμματα σεξουαλικής αγωγής που ακολουθούν συγκεκριμένες προδιαγραφές μπορούν να έχουν θετικό αντίκτυπο στην γενικότερη υγεία και ευεξία των μαθητριών και μαθητών.

Η σεξουαλική αγωγή ήταν πάντοτε ένα ζήτημα που προκαλούσε συγκρούσεις. Για να εφαρμοστεί με επιτυχία στην Ελλάδα χρειάζονται καταρτισμένοι εκπαιδευτικοί και φορείς εκπαιδευτικής πολιτικής που αντιμετωπίζουν το θέμα με υπευθυνότητα. Επιπλέον σύμφωνα με τα αποτελέσματα αυτής της μελέτης χρειάζεται επίσης επανεξέταση των περιεχομένων των σχολικών βιβλίων ώστε να ενταχθούν σε αυτά κείμενα και εικόνες που παρουσιάζουν ζητήματα του σώματος και σεξουαλικότητας· να ενθαρρύνεται η συμμετοχή των μαθητών και μαθητριών

στο σχεδιασμό των προγραμμάτων και την επιλογή της ύλης· και τέλος να δίνεται στους εκπαιδευτικούς η δυνατότητα να εμβαθύνουν και συζητούν τις εμπειρίες τους.

Λέξεις κλειδιά: σεξουαλική αγωγή, δημοτικό σχολείο, Ελλάδα

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When I started my doctoral studies my son Andreas was a baby. The two of us have spent much time during his first year in different libraries. He was sleeping in his pram while I was checking for books or articles. The first time I heard him saying “mom” was the day I was departing to deliver my first conference presentation! Andreas and my research developed together. I would like to take the opportunity now to offer my apologies to him for occasionally being absent, for burning his food a few times, for bringing him with me in seminars (when there was the occasional babysitting disaster), for hoping that he would fall asleep quite quickly so I can continue my work in the evenings! He is my treasure and the best reminder of the truly important things in life!

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PART II

List of Publications

- I Gerouki, M., (2009). “Innovations” on hold—Sex education in the Greek primary schools. *Health Education (109)*1, 49–65.
- II Gerouki, M., (2008). Pushed to the margins—sex and relationships in Greek primary textbooks. *Sex Education (8)*3, 329–343.
- III Gerouki, M., (2009). Enhancing Children’s Wellbeing: The Role of Sex and Relationships Education—A Case Study from Greece. In de Souza, M.; Francis, L.J.; O’Higgins-Norman, J.; Scott, D. (Eds.), *The International Handbook on Education for Spirituality, Care and Wellbeing* (pp. 1189–1206). Springer Netherlands.
- IV Gerouki, M., (forthcoming). “Teacher, will you marry me?” Integrating teachers’ stories and self-reflective texts for exploring sexuality discourses in school settings.

1 Introduction

This doctoral dissertation is about primary school sex education in Greece from the viewpoint of an expatriate Greek, primary school teacher and researcher. It consists of two parts. The second part includes the four publications in which I separately explored and discussed different aspects regarding the provision of sex education currently in Greece. The first part aims to place those publications into a coherent frame in terms of various theoretical underpinnings, but also in terms of a range of sociocultural and interpersonal conditions. Moreover, it aims to provide an overall understanding of various factors that pertain the successful development and implementation of sex education programs in Greece and suggest possible steps in overcoming them.

The general framework of this work is influenced by anti-essentialist approaches to scientific endeavour. Reality in such terms is defined as complex and subjective. “Human understanding can appear to be formed not according to some universal canon of rationality, but by particular, and local, circumstances of a place and time” (Trigg, 2001, p. 223). In those terms, knowledge is treated as ambiguous and unstable. Moreover, knowledge becomes subject to change, since it is a joint outcome of intersubjective human perceptions of the world in relation to their experiences of it. In sum, what we know is greatly influenced by who generates it, who is introducing it and the cultural pre-text that this is introduced (Beck, 1993; McLaren, 1995; Somerville, 2007; Cosgrove & McHugh, 2008).

As a scientific endeavour this postgraduate research project thus cannot be disconnected from its personal element, that is, the researcher herself. The way I understand it, there is no such thing as objective reality since humans construct their understandings and consequently form perceptions of reality based on subjective interpretations of our experiences. The researcher’s responsibility is to explore multiple realities, hers included, in order to provide a more coherent picture of her research endeavour. While working for this doctoral dissertation often I had to ponder and resolve issues that derived from this personal thesis. But this above personal thesis is also the outcome of my engagement with my postgraduate work. “My experiences then opened an ongoing conversation between academic knowledge, political and ethical commitments and personal life which had continued to this day”, a similar thought nicely expressed by Weeks (2000, p. 4).

In that sense, it is important for the reader of this work to remember that behind the text there is also an individual whose biography and self-formation processes are often narrated along the lines of the research report. This is especially obvious in the parts of this work such as the chapter that follows, where I present biographical information and reflect upon personal decisions that had shaped my path in research, as well as in places where the implications of conducting research on familiar ground are more thoroughly examined (chapter 6.3 and study IV).

Keeping the autobiographical aspect in line with the data analyses and other argument over research matters was a conscious decision on my part. Informing the reader about the researcher's frame of reference that influenced the research itself is essential. Discussing such issues, I believe, facilitates the understanding of the overall research study and process. Within the framework of this work that aspires to pragmatism as well as transformative / emancipatory approaches, investigating the role of the researcher as part of the research study also becomes crucial however, informing the research inferences to an important extent. "Pragmatists take seriously the assumption that we are historically and socially situated, that when we read the world we can never be quite sure if we are reading the 'world' or reading ourselves" (Cherryholmes, 1992, p. 14). Acknowledging the subjective self has thus been seen as the first step in reflection. Placing the self into a context of social others and relating the experience of the individual to a broader research framework is regarded as contributing element to the reflexive aspect that this research endeavour also advocates.

In accordance with this, the second chapter of this dissertation starts with an overview of the personal and professional conditions that informed the research project generally. The chapter discusses how and why a research study that focuses particularly on Greece and Greek educational conditions, especially those that affect sex education teaching in the primary sector, was designed, developed and completed in Finland. For this purpose, a brief overview of various sociocultural conditions that characterize the two countries, Greece and Finland, is presented. This postgraduate research project, like many others I suspect, was not developed in a vacuum. This chapter also introduces the background against which this project was developed. The aim is to place the whole research endeavour within a broader schema and provide the reader with an overall understanding of the research tasks of the project. These tasks are also summarised in this chapter.

The concepts and theories that influenced the current work appear in chapter three, in which pragmatic and critical conceptualizations are discussed. The aim is to unite those understandings to the study's overall focus

and goals. In chapter three, I also provide a general discussion of sex education as school-based intervention. Sex education teaching has always been a controversial issue, mainly because, sex education as a subject is influenced by differing conceptualizations of sexuality as a part of human identity and human agency. The concepts of permissive and restrictive approaches to human sexuality are thus discussed in chapter three. These approaches usually underlie the ways sex education is being taught by and large. A short introduction to the various ways sex education is taught as well as a concise overview of how different countries offer such teaching is additionally provided.

This doctoral work, as mentioned, is based on a compilation of four studies that have been published in different academic journals and a handbook of education. Chapter four introduces the research tasks that informed the four publications as well as the research process. The overall process was built on an ongoing dialogue, a system of self-reflection and critical interrogation that help define and redefine, think and rethink research issues. This dialogical process was constructed not only from particular critical self-interrogations and theorizing of the research matter but also as a response to the opinions of the various reviewers of the studies that constitute this work, at all stages of their compilation. In the case of this work, the dialogical process was also enhanced by the design of the studies. Chapter four thus discusses the multiple studies design (quantitative and qualitative), the research data sources (survey questionnaire, document analysis, interviews and a self-reflection text) along with the sequential process of completing this research project. The limitations, challenges and considerations of the overall research project are also discussed there.

Although the findings of the research endeavour have been discussed separately in each of the four publications that informed this work, the fifth chapter of this part offers a brief summary of the findings of each study as well as combining these individual studies into a coherent synthesis. The goal is to facilitate an alternative discussion of their findings.

Consequently, chapter six discusses the findings of these studies by adopting three different focuses; namely: the educational policies that direct sex education teaching in Greece; the role of teachers as active agents of sex education; and finally the role of the researcher as an influential part of the entire research project. The aim of this study is to provide research-based data in order to promote the introduction and successful implementation of sex education in Greece. Chapter seven, which completes this work, discusses how the research findings of the studies can be connected into practice in education and policy-making.

2 Sex Education as research topic

2.1 From Greece to Finland: An autobiographical note

In August 1999, I moved to Finland under a contract to teach Greek as a second / foreign language. This decision surprised my family and many of my friends, not necessarily for the moving-away-from-home part. Since my father had been an army officer, moving was a natural circumstance for my family. It was more about the choice of place. Moving to Finland, for the average Greek, sounds close to moving to another planet. However, that distance was necessary to be able to study health education, and later on research on the development and implementation of primary school sex education. Let me explain why.

I obtained my teacher's licence in 1986 after successfully completing a two-year teacher training program. I happened to be among the last primary teachers who obtained their licence through a two-year study program since the educational reform of the time (law 1566/1985) introduced an upgrade to teaching qualifications among other major changes. As a result, from that time onwards Greek primary teachers (like secondary teachers all those years) needed to complete a four-year university program in order to be appointed to schools. Primary education university departments, established in major cities throughout the country, replaced the educational academies (Παιδαγωγικές Ακαδημίες) that had been supplying primary schools in Greece with teachers since 1935 (law 5802/1933).

I always wanted to be a teacher, unlike most (70%) of my future colleagues, who at the time I finished my studies reported that for them becoming a teacher was not a decision based on their love of children or affiliation with teaching, rather a matter of necessity¹ (Freiderikou & Folerou-Tserouli, 1991). As a child, I loved going to school, I liked books, and most of my teachers, especially primary school teachers.

In Greece, compulsory school attendance for children starts at the age of five (pre-school). Attendance, as well as the provision of books, is free of charge and for the six years of primary school, children attend 25–29 hours of

¹ According to this 1985 study, most teachers had chosen their profession because the two-year course was a cheaper way to get a job; they did not succeed in their University exams; they wanted to escape the hard conditions of working in the countryside which was the case for most of their families; or for the women a teaching job was the only job their families found acceptable for their gender.

subjects like language, mathematics, religion, history, environmental studies, science, social and political science, geography, English, physical education, art and music weekly. The class teacher usually teaches all subjects except English, physical education and in some schools music. The number of pupils in any class cannot exceed 30 and there is one teacher responsible for each class.

Thus, I had been teaching as a primary teacher in Greece for six years prior to moving to Finland. I obtained my first teaching job in 1993 and my permanent teaching place a year later. Until the end of the 90s, teachers in Greece were appointed through a national waiting list system, *epetirida*. The reform of 1997–1998 (law 2525/1997), among other adjustments, abolished the enrolment list system, introducing a national examination² in its place. By that time however, two types of teacher co-existed in primary schools. Those (the vast majority) who, like myself, had been through the old two-year system, and those from the new four-year university system. Another reform attempted to resolve this problem as well. Let me elaborate on this.

Being a teacher or a student, or both, in Greece is full of surprises and unpredictable events. One of the reasons is the numerous educational reforms introduced by the Ministry of Education and other policy-makers (for a historical account and a longer discussion on this issue, see Persianis 1998). Educational reforms are proceeding rapidly, without any prior notice or preparation and in most cases, without having obtained a basic consensus among the educational community (Pigiaki, 1999), thus resulting in crisis and conflict. In that sense, Greek teachers often perceive the various educational reforms as an obstacle to their work (Pirgiotakis, 1992). Moreover, as elsewhere (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006), they simply choose to ignore them in many cases (Didaskalou, 2002).

As researchers indicate, the Greek educational system, is centralised and bureaucratic (Damanakis, 1997; Kazamias & Rousakis, 2003; Flouris & Pasiadis, 2003; Mattheou, 2003; Alahiotis & Karantzia-Stavlioti, 2006) despite attempts at change (Kazamias & Rousakis, 2003) leaving limited scope for teachers to take the initiative and actively intervene in the curriculum and other school functions (Didaskalou, 2002). The principal characteristic of the Greek primary school system as Damanakis (1997) notes, is homogeneity, a consequence attributed to centralism. In his own words:

Administration is highly centralist and leaves little free space either to the district school administration or to persons operating in the school system. Most deci-

² ASEP (www.asep.gr)

sions are taken in the Ministry of Education so that the school authorities under it function only as executive bodies (Damanakis 1997, p. 11).

This uniformity is also reflected in the existence of a central curriculum and the fact that there is a single textbook for each school subject.³ Within such an environment, consequently, reforms in Greece are fragmented, top down and mainly introduced, at least those since the country's accession into European Union (EU), as a response to EU recommendations (Didaskalou, 2002; Bouzakis & Koustourakis, 2002; Kazamias & Rousakis, 2003; Alahiotis & Karantzia-Stavlioti, 2006). In fact, in recent years these reforms mainly have been financially supported by EU funds (Flouris & Pasiadis, 2003).

The year before moving to Finland I had to enrol in a teacher training program called "equalization", *eksomoiosis*, addressed to all those teachers who had received their qualifications within the old study system (P.D. 130/90). It was a program funded 75% by EU funds, intended to upgrade primary teacher qualifications. This national program was mandatory; it took place outside teachers' working schedule and lasted from one to four semesters depending on the working experience of the trainee. Thus, for an academic year I devoted 10–15 hours per week to attending and taking exams for different courses (eighteen in my case) designed and provided by the Department of Primary Education of the local university. Personally, I had welcomed the opportunity for teacher training and placed high expectations on the training content and purpose. I soon found myself however having to attend endless lectures on subjects that I felt had little or nothing to do with contemporary teaching practice and teachers' actual needs.⁴ Nonetheless, a two-hour lecture (part of the sociology of education course) was on human sexuality and sex education issues.

As a primary school teacher, by that time I had already realised that school is a place where sexuality is being manifested. Moreover, the attention of pupils is not restricted to concepts of linguistic structures, numbers and facts on environmental issues. Young people at school also project feelings of intimacy, discussing their bodies, asking questions and exchanging informa-

³ A trend that Universities also followed up to end of 2008. As the newspaper *To Vima* (Abolish the single textbook in Universities, 06.11.2008) announced, that the Minister of Education has signed the law that abolishes the single textbook and introduces a suitable bibliography for each course instead.

⁴ For example, one of the mandatory courses (approximately 25 hours of lectures and two volumes of textbooks) was about ancient mathematics. In that course I learnt how to add and subtract as ancient Egyptians and Sumerians did! At the same year I was teaching a 3rd grade of 24 pupils, ten of whom were newly arrived immigrants with no prior knowledge of the Greek language. Ancient mathematics seemed the least of my problems.

tion about sexuality and relationship issues, both theirs and others. In accordance with these personal observations, a number of researchers have identified school settings as significant social sites for the production and reproduction of sexuality discourses (Wolpe, 1988; Epstein & Jonhson, 1998; Kehily, 2002a; Epstein et al., 2003; Renold, 2005; Myers, 2005; Rofes, 2005; Sikes, 2006). In the words of Renold (2003, p. 189) "Primary schools are far from asexual environments and primary school children cannot be presumed (sexually) innocent". Nevertheless, I had never the opportunity to discuss and reflect systematically on sex education issues, either as a pre or in-service teacher, or a student. Human sexuality was a taboo issue when I was a student and remained so when I became a teacher. Let me elaborate.

Sex education in Greece: a short introduction

Human sexuality and sex education for children and young people have been the topic of various private publications in Greece for almost 100 years. Books by Greek authors that discuss the sexual development of children or sex education are dated as back as the 1930. Some of these titles include: Drakoulides (1930) "Sexuality Education", Katsigra (1932) "Preparing the girl for sexuality issues", Katsigra (1935) "Sexuality education for the boy", Antonopoulos (1953) "Sex education for the young people", Kaliafas (1955) "The educational problem of sexuality impulse", Aspiotis (1969) "The sphere of sexuality and the young human being", and Gelis (1972) "Sex education for children, adolescents and young people: for doctors, parents, teachers, etc."

A number of private (non-governmental) institutes raised the issue of sex education. For example, the "Hellenic Society of Eugenics and Human Genetics" prepared the first forum about "Sex education of young people" in 1963. Sixteen years later, in 1979, the same society organized a scientific symposium in Athens on "Sex Education". Medical Associations also organized forums and discussions on sexuality and sex education on various occasions. At a conference held by the World Health Organization in Athens (1978), a review of the provision of sex education interventions in other European countries was presented. During the conference the lack of a similar provision in Greece was mentioned and criticized (Stavropoulos, 1981).

The discussion and organization of forums and conferences, as well as the publication of articles and books on the subject of sexuality and sex education, continued in the 80s and 90s as well. For example, a two volume publication on Gender Relationships which resulted from a conference on Sex Education and Gender Equality, organized at the University of Athens

(1991), outlined the evidence available in a range of aspects concerning human sexual behaviour and education (Paraskevopoulos, 1995, 1998). At the beginning of the 90s, the Greek Ministry of Education also took some initiative in this direction. In 1998, a conference addressed to secondary education teachers was co-organized by the “Greek Institute of Sexology” and the Greek Ministry of Education. The conference discussed Sex Education in schools, the papers being published in the form of a book (Gotzamanis, 1998). During these years, Greek translations of books on the subject have been published. The Greek public became familiar with the work of Darwin, Freud, Ellis, Reich and other important thinkers. In addition, Greek writers from various disciplines, such as religion (Zoumas, 1999), education (Aftia-Papaioannou, 1982; Goliaris & Tzoura-Tzeveleki, 1994), sociology (Antonopoulou, 1997; Lazos, 1997), anthropology (Kourtovic, 1994; Kafetzopoulos, 1999), medicine (Detorakis, 1983; Askitis, 1997) to name just a few, kept the discussion of sexuality, sexual development, and sex education going.

Private publications that introduced sex education programs for elementary school settings were made available for teachers immediately after the millennium years (Theodoraki & Ioannou, 2001; Xrysafi, 2004a, 2004b). A number of new titles discussing issues of human sexuality, sexual development and sex education were also published (Loumakou et al., 2001; Detorakis & Papageorgiou, 2002; Monk Michael, 2002; Kreatsas, 2003; Askitis, 2006). At roughly the same time, a number of mainly medical studies on issues such sexual health and behaviour (Giotakis et al., 1998; Kordoutis et al., 2000; Loumakou et al., 2001; Mavroforou et al., 2004; Ioannidi-Kapolou, 2004), and sexual knowledge (Giannitsas et al., 1998; Tountas et al., 2004) had been published as well. From 2000 onwards, Greece also provides data on sexual health for the World Health Organization cross national biennial study, Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC).⁵

Sex education is not a curriculum subject and its extra-curricular presence in the Greek educational system, as this thesis suggests is very limited. Papanoutsos, the general secretary of the Greek Ministry of Education from the 60s mentioned that “the issue of sexuality education has not been officially discussed yet. There are no plans or projects for this, however, the Ministry will certainly engage in the discussion very soon” (*To Vima*, newspaper issue of 30/10/1964). However, years later, a course entitled “Aspects of Human Sexuality” which was introduced in 1977 in a private college of higher education in Athens (*Deree Pear’s College*), provoked a lot of publicity, and

⁵ www.hbsc.org

produced lively discussions. The news on the provision of the course reached the Minister of Education, and the minister himself asked to be informed on the subject (Stavropoulos, 1981).

It took almost forty years for the Ministry of Education to produce a school-book in which sexuality and relationships issues are discussed. The 175 page book entitled “Sexual Education and Gender Relationships”, as the newspaper *Eleftherotypia* announced in its issue of 21/1/2001, was developed by Dr Papathanassiou, chairman of the Greek Institute of Sexology, and his associates. The newspaper also announced in the same issue that the course of sex education will be introduced soon [sic], in the third grade of Lyceum (that is, to 17–18 year-old students). However, there is no particular reference to the book, or the course in the websites of the Greek Ministry of Education, or that of the Pedagogical Institute. Therefore, whether the book has been used for the development of Health Education projects in the secondary sector is dubious.⁶

According to more recent announcements from the Ministry of Education (Flash news, 09.05.2009) sex education will be introduced in the elementary sector beginning in the 2009–2010 school year. The sex education and relationships program will be based on two books, as well as a corresponding teacher’s book for each publication (one for pupils of 6–8 years old, that is, for grades 1–3, and another one for pupils of 9–12 years old, that is grades 4–6), authored by Thanos Askitis a well-know psychiatrist in Greece, and his associates. Another set of books from the same authors discusses psychological health and gender relationships. The authorship of the books (figure 1) had been co-founded by EU and national funding, and they were published in 2008 by the Greek Ministry of Education. As Dr. Askitis mentions in his website, the school age is regarded as a very appropriate time for children to receive the first stimuli that will contribute to their proper psychosexual development. Accordingly, the aim of the program is to promote the psychological and sexual health of pupils. The books discuss a range of topics from bodily awareness and hygiene to contraception and family planning, respect, and interpersonal gender relationships. Sex education, as the author recommends, could be introduced as part of the cross curriculum interventions (see chapter 2.2).⁷

⁶ Moreover, health education, as an extra-curricular activity, in the secondary sector is optional and takes place at the end of the official school programme.

⁷ Although as I write these lines we are in the middle of the autumn term of the 2009-2010 school year, there is no indication of fulfilling the above announcement regarding sex education teaching. As a matter of fact, the minister who had announced the introduction of sex education is not in office any more since his party was defeated during the recent elections (October 2009) in Greece. Some sources within the ministry of Education however, discuss a

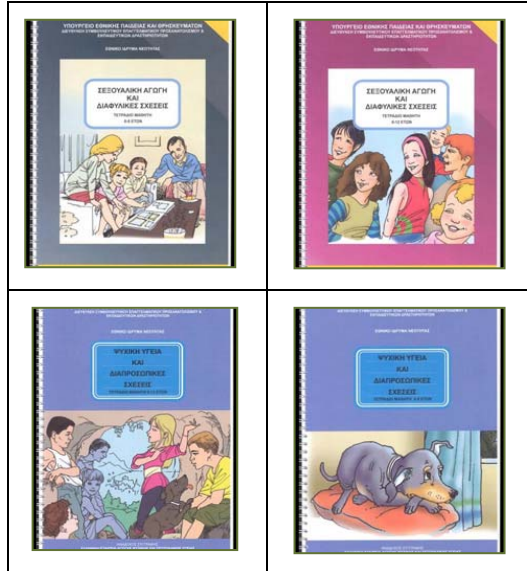


Figure 1. The new primary books for sex education programs

As I argue in various parts of this work, no research study is decided, or completed in a vacuum. There are particular factors that influence decisions throughout the research process as well as prior to the project development. In my case, that lecture on human sexuality and sex education in combination with my teaching experiences and the bad working and study conditions in my country (in general but also my particular interest) set the grounds for doing something different. I never completed the “*equalization*” program, opting instead for a place abroad where I could work as a teacher and pursue studies on the subject of sex education. That place was Finland.

Greece and Finland in a nutshell

Greece and Finland are to be found on the borders of the EU. Beyond the choice of the blue and white colours on their flags, they share many more similarities in social construction and organization. Both countries operate as parliamentary constitutional republics and recognize the President as the

pilot introduction of sex education in 50 primary schools throughout the country. Nevertheless, this information is not supported by any official documentation that I was able to discover.

Head of State. They participate in many major international organizations such as the European Union, The Council of Europe, United Nations, The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and so on. Moreover, according to the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, both countries have signed a number of bilateral agreements and cooperate in various joint programs, and a Finnish-Greek friendship group consisting of 12 people operates in the Finnish parliament.

A closer look at indicators of social and economic levels in both countries reveal similar standards of living. For example, according to statistics published by the United Nations, the Human Development Index (HDI) in 2009,⁸ was 0.959 for Finland (no. 12), and 0.942 for Greece (no. 25), placing both countries within the top thirty worldwide. Similarly, according to 2008 data from the World Bank, Finland is placed no. 33 and Greece no. 27 in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita. Literacy levels are 99.0 for Finland and 96.0 for Greece⁹.

The health care system in both countries is organized and provided by the state. Although health care services from the private sector are not uncommon (in Greece especially there is a stronger tendency to ignore state health services in favour of private clinics and physicians), both states ensure that people's needs could be met by the public services as well.

Similarly, education is a state-provided benefit in both countries. However, Greece occupies the last place among the 27 European Union countries in expenditure on education purposes.¹⁰ Despite many political announcements to the contrary, Greece still (Budget for Fiscal year 2009) allocates 3% of the gross national product (GNP) to education, when the EU average is 5.1% and the Scandinavian countries spend over 7% of their GNP for that purpose. Expenditure on primary to tertiary education in 2005 was close to 6000 USD per Greek student and close to 8000 USD per Finnish student (OECD 2008).

The limited financial support, along with a tendency to introduce numerous educational reforms, as mentioned already, affects all levels and many aspects of public education in Greece. It also often creates appalling condi-

⁸ The Human Development Index (HDI) a standard means of measuring well-being by examining various measures of life expectancy, literacy, education, standard of living, and GDP per capita for countries worldwide.

⁹ This chapter was formed before the financial crisis of 2010 in Greece that lead to the intervention from the EU countries and the International Monetary Fund. The author is not in a position to discuss the economics of Greece or Finland in a thorough manner.

¹⁰ However, Greek households spent about 2.4 billion euro per year in supportive private teaching. This figure includes students who attend the public school as well. Approximately the same sum is spent on private teaching services at all levels for those students that do not attend public schools. (Katsikas, 2008).

tions, as the number of days lost because of strikes or school lock-out *katlipsis*,¹¹ shows (figure 2).



Figure 2. Demonstrations about educational issues in Greece¹²

These forms of protest result every year in many hours of missed lessons and in some cases in serious damages to public and private property. In addition, such demonstrations of antithetical opinions often result in violent episodes in which teachers, parents and students are confronted by the police or other opponent forces¹³ (Doder, 1994, 1996; *Greek students riot over proposed reforms*, 1997; Labi, 2006, 2007).

Finland on the other hand, apart from occupying for many consequent years the top positions in the OECD'S Program for International Student Assessment (PISA)—diametrically antithetical from the Greek place, as a matter of fact (OECD 2008)—offers a much more peaceful educational environment. An additional positive factor of personal significance was that the state provides teaching and study opportunities on the subject of sex education at all levels of its educational system.

Sex education has been offered systematically as part of the school curricula in Finland since the 1970s. With a slight decline during the 1990s, the number of hours devoted on sex education teaching showed an increase again from the beginning of 2000, when the emphasis was placed on health education. Accordingly, “The purpose in education is not to forbid sex but to reduce the health risks involved and to support making informed choices” (Suvivuo

¹¹ This is a special form of protest in which the students or parents, or both, of a school (primary, secondary, or higher education) decide to close the school down and refuse entrance to teachers or other staff.

¹² Eleftherotypia (www.enet.gr), online search for articles about school occupations and educational demonstrations / strikes (accessed 28.11.2008). One can find similar pictures and articles for most years throughout the 90s and onwards.

¹³ Including the violent death in his school yard of the teacher Nikos Temponeras, by right-wings members, in January 1991.

et al., 2009, p. 355). From 2001, the provision of sex education became mandatory for grades seven to nine as part of the health education course (Knerr, 2006; Parker et al., 2009). Most Finnish people believe in the merits of school sex education, many supporting the introduction of sex education at an earlier stage, from the elementary school (Nykänen, 1996). As a matter of fact, elements of the subject are being introduced and discussed throughout the primary school years (see an example in Appendix A). Moreover, the provision of sex education is not limited to school establishments but can incorporate other health services sectors as well, so that education about sexuality and sex related issues is provided by multiple sources including schools, social and health services, the church, the media, and so on (Linamo, 2000; Lottes & Kontula, 2000). Finally, the sexual health knowledge of the population and the adolescent population is systematically monitored through a national biennial Health Promotion Study (Knerr, 2006). Data from this study are being used to evaluate the provision of school sex education (STAKES, 2008).

Sexual and reproductive health in Finland is good, as many statistical indicators reveal. Maternal and prenatal mortality is significantly low, abortion and teenage pregnancies are rare—approximately 187 abortions /1000 child births, under 15 abortions /1000 affect 15–19 year-old girls—and sexually transmitted diseases, along with AIDS and HIV infections limited (STAKES, 2008). On the other hand, as I have argued in more detail in another part of this work (see Study III), sexual health indicators in Greece provide a picture of a population that faces various sexual health related problems. In particular, Greeks seem to use abortion as a contraceptive method (abortions are double the number of living births); often practice unsafe sex, have generally erroneous knowledge about contraception and other sexual related issues, face infertility problems, and report many cases of sexual and child abuse. Because of this, sexual health researchers agree that Greece presents a picture of an underdeveloped country where preventive mechanisms are not employed. Moreover, to a great extent, they attribute the gaps in knowledge, as well as particular behaviours (such as unprotected sex), and attitudes (like lack of negotiation), to the absence of systematic, structured, school-based sex education (Agathonos-Georgopoulou, 1997; Kordoutis, et al., 2000; Kakavoulis, 2001; Kreatsas, 2003; Mavroforou et al., 2004; Ioannidi-Kapolou, 2004; Tountas et al., 2004).

In light of this, moving to Finland to pursue my research into sex education was not such a bad idea after all.

2.2 The background of the postgraduate research project

I completed my degree in health education (Faculty of Sports and Health Sciences, University of Jyväskylä / Finland) in 2004. My master's thesis was based on a quantitative research study of Greek primary school teachers' opinions (February–March 2003). That study, which was published as a monograph later (Gerouki, 2008) investigated teachers' opinions, beliefs and attitudes towards the introduction of sex and relationships education in the Greek primary school particularly. One of the main findings was that primary school teachers in Greece subscribed to the importance of teaching about sex and relationships issues in schools. The vast majority of the respondents (89%) indicated that primary school may be a suitable area for such interventions. Most of them also mentioned that occasionally they discussed related issues as a response to particular pupils' behaviour or questions, or both (Gerouki, 2007a).

Interestingly, while I was involved in collecting and analysing these research data, a *New Curriculum* for elementary and secondary education sectors, published in the Greek Government Gazette (March 2003), became a state law. This educational reform among other things also introduced the (CCTF), *Cross-Curricular / Thematic Framework* (Alahiotis & Karantzia-Stavlioti, 2006). Cross-thematic activities, such as Health Education, were also mentioned in the CCTF (Greek Government Gazette, 2003a, p. 3737). A few months following this publication, the Ministry of Education in cooperation with the Pedagogical Institute, *Pedagogiko Instituto*¹⁴ announced an open tender from authoring teams for the development of new elementary school textbooks that would correspond to teaching and learning principles introduced by the *New Curriculum*. The development of the new textbooks and other educational material had been 75% funded by EU funds as part of the 3rd Supportive Measures pack, Act 2.2.1.a *Composition of instruction books and development of supportive materials for the primary and pre-school* (Pedagogical Institute, Meetings 07/03).

To complete my master's thesis, I was in contact with health education coordinators who provided me with relevant educational material and other official documents. It was clear from reading this material that sex and rela-

¹⁴ The Pedagogical Institute (PI) is an autonomous public body established by law 1566/85 (as supplemented by law 2525/97) that operates under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. Its field of responsibility within primary and secondary education is the formulation of guidelines, the preparation of timetables and curricula, the commission and approval of textbooks, the application of vocational guidance, the introduction of new subjects, the application of new teaching methods, the provision of in-service training for teachers, and so on.

tionships education has been one of the thematic units for health education programs from 2001 (Gerouki, 2008, p. 50).

Health Education in the Greek educational system is considered to be an interdisciplinary activity that has the potential to advance school life and relate school to the society and social life. As is mentioned on the web pages of the Greek Ministry of Education, the aim of Health Education is to protect, improve and promote the mental and physical health and social well-being of students by encouraging the development of social skills and critical thinking, as well as by improving their social and physical environment. The innovative aspect of those programs according to the Pedagogical Institute is that they do not follow the traditional teaching methods, that of the teacher who speaks and the students who listen. Active learning forms the basis of this innovative action and underlies all school projects. The target is to cultivate and enhance an approach to learning that is based on teachers' and students' initiative and cooperative abilities. Encouraging critical thinking, cooperative work and collective effort was seen as the path to learning. Accordingly, two ways for teachers to discuss health education at school were proposed –either by introducing different health related topics when the opportunity presents itself from the curricula of the various school subjects, or by developing and implementing health education projects (Gouvra et al., 2001). The decision to implement a health education project (or not) remained however with the teacher.

In 2001 therefore, the Ministry of Education for enhancing further the implementation of health education programs appointed 68 health education coordinators, responsible for monitoring and evaluating the various health education projects organized in the district under their supervision. Their duty is to provide teachers with material, information, or consultation for developing such programs. The primary school teachers interested in implementing a health education project can do this through the implementation of extra-curricula programs called the “flexible zone” *evelikti zoni*, that allows 2 to 4 hours weekly for such interdisciplinary activities. The material available for developing and implementing these programs includes textbooks, activity books, posters, leaflets, slides, CD-Roms and so on, approved by the Pedagogical Institute. However, much work on health education programs is done by teachers who develop their own authentic materials or adapt existing ones to their specific needs and purposes. Teachers interested in developing and implementing a health education program are able to select a topic from seven general categories or thematic units. These are nutrition; cardiovascular diseases and physical exercise; consumers' education; road and vehicle edu-

cation—prevention of road accidents; dental hygiene; addictions—mental health; and sex and relationships education.

I completed my master's thesis when I was more informed but not much wiser. According to that analysis, the great majority of teachers believed in the importance of sex and relationships education. Teachers, moreover, discussed the subject in class in the form of *curriculum-enacted-on-the-spot* (Gerouki, 2007a). However, at the same time the feeling I got when talking with the health education coordinator of my former school district, with teacher respondents to my research questionnaire and with teachers, colleagues of mine, was that they did not seem really willing to implement a health education program on sex and relationships.¹⁵

My new research endeavour started taking shape against this background.

2.3 Research Tasks

This doctoral work is based firstly on the recognition of young people's health and well-being as a central aspect of the educational discussion. In addition, underlying this work there is an understanding of education as political in the sense that educational aims and goals reflect policy-making particular agendas. Finally, a view of the researcher as generator or advocator of change, or preferably both, is also important in this work.

This postgraduate project was designed therefore, to understand the place and provision of sex education within the Greek primary school system, given on the one hand the need for sex education in Greece, as this is demonstrated by a range of pragmatic sexual health considerations (see Studies I & III), and on the other hand its recent appearance in the Greek curriculum (even as an extra-curricular option). I also set out to identify significant factors that influence this provision. Finally, based on the findings of these studies I propose possible ways teachers can be encouraged to include sex education programs in their teaching interventions. The research design thus aimed to explore the issues set out below.

¹⁵ For example, the Pedagogical Institute published elementary schools projects that had been conducted during the 2003-2004 school year (another EU 3rd Measures Pack funded project). From the 275 published projects, 63 refer to any one of the seven health education thematic units. From those, one (pre-school) dealt with how children are born, one discussed family structures generally and another one emotions. The rest were on subjects of local history or local interest, the forthcoming at the time Olympic Games, art, music, and so on.

Study I

The position and visibility of sex education, as part of health education teaching, in the Greek primary school; particularly:

- Which of the seven health education thematic units received special attention from teachers for developing health education projects?
- Was there a significant difference in the selection preferences among the various topics?
- How aware were teachers of the possibility of implementing sex education projects, as well as of the educational materials available for this purpose?

Studies I & II

Current inhibiting and enhancing factors in the development and implementation of sex education programs in Greece; particularly:

- What are the factors obstructing selecting of Sex and Relationships Education, as opposed to the reasons that make teachers favour other thematic units?
- How are issues of sexuality and the human body visually and textually represented in the school books?
- What kinds of human relationships are discussed in the textbooks?

Study III

The impact of sex education implementations on teachers and pupils; particularly:

- How did teachers, early adopters of sex education programs, describe their overall experience in terms of benefits and concerns?
- What kind of impact (if any) did the sex education program implementation have on pupils' learning styles and approach to learning?
- What were the outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and behaviours from participating in a sex education program for the parties involved?

Study IV

Teachers, dealing with sexuality issues as practitioners, including the researcher vis-à-vis the research project; particularly:

- Is the school setting an arena for sexual behaviour manifestation (flirting particularly)?

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- How is such behaviour being manifested?
 - What is the impact of manifestations of sexuality in teachers' perceptions of personal and professional issues?
 - What is the relation between the researcher and her subject matter?

In order to be able to investigate these issues I first needed to establish a theoretical basis and define the concepts that guided my investigation. The third chapter of this part therefore introduces and discusses those theoretical frames and concepts that influenced the research study and informed decisions for selecting particular thematic areas for developing the publications that comprise the second part of this work.

3 Theories and Concepts

3.1 Research as a means to a goal and a means for change

Theoretical conceptualizations can be regarded as the working platform of the research process that reflect the researcher's perceptions of the nature of reality and knowledge, along with their understanding of the ethical codes and methods that underpin the research process (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Morgan, 2008; Mertens, 2008). Subscription to one theory-system over another demands a certain involvement and understanding on the part of the researcher of those methodological, axiological, epistemological, and ontological concepts that address philosophical questions regarding the scientific endeavour in general. In other words, theoretical affiliation is a manifestation of the means the researcher uses to approach her research subject matter and research process.

Two philosophical viewpoints have influenced this work, pragmatism and the transformative-emancipatory stance. I see these as interconnected and complementary in the sense that one stance expands and completes the other. Paradigmatic boundaries are not always clear, being decided upon arbitrary terms imposed by scientists in the sense that it is possible for paradigms occasionally to overlap (Morgan, 2008). If communication between paradigms is possible, then adopting a stance inspired by more than one paradigm is also an option. For example, Greene and Garacelli (1997, in Plano Clark et al., 2008) and Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) argue that adopting the viewpoint of one only paradigm is not a research pre-condition, since multiple paradigms can be used in a research study provided that this choice is manifested in an explicit way.

Among the basic underpinnings of a pragmatist approach is its applied and practical view of the research endeavour (Cherryholmes, 1992; Garrison & Neiman, 2003; Maxcy, 2003; Morgan, 2008). That is, research should be problem-oriented and justified on the grounds of identified needs. "It is not the abstract pursuit of knowledge through 'inquiry' that is central to a pragmatic approach, but rather the attempt to gain knowledge in the pursuit of desired ends" (Morgan, 2008, p. 57). Within this context, the goal for undertaking this particular research endeavour was not to affirm the absence or limited provision of sex education in Greece. Since any Greek teacher, parent or student can speak about this, the goal was to be able to provide scientific, research-based evidence that backs this statement up. Moreover, it was to

seek the factors that encourage this absence, in order eventually to be able to provide arguments for counter-action.

For Dewey, one of the most important pragmatists, knowledge is produced by acting upon reflected experience. Experience a fundamental element of knowledge for Dewey is the product of the transaction between the organisms and their environment (Biesta & Burbules, 2003). In that sense, “knowledge claims cannot be totally abstracted from contingent beliefs, interests and projects” (Howe 1988 in Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p. 28). At the same time however, knowledge should also be regarded as the building-block of experience, not its end product (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 48). For Dewey, the objects of experience are products of knowledge, as long as understanding is based on action. “The ‘missing link’ between experience and knowledge is action, because it is only through action that we can get an understanding of the conditions of the *happening* of an experience” (emphasis original, Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 51). Thus, knowledge is an embodied construction.

The relationship between experience, action and knowledge makes the recognition that decisions on the research direction and goals are influenced by individual intersubjective perceptions, central to the pragmatic approach. “The alternative to objectivism is, however, not relativism but intersubjectivity” (Biesta & Burbules, 2003, p. 108). This way of perceiving scientific work is not seen as problematic from the pragmatist point of view, simply functioning as an indication that researcher and research outcome cannot be treated separately. “Pragmatists decide what they want to research, guided by their personal value systems; that is, they study what they think is important to study” (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998, p. 26).

The inception for my involvement with this subject was influenced by my experiences as a teacher.¹⁶ I undertook this research project because of a gen-

¹⁶ I was describing such an experience in the introductory paragraph of my master’s thesis when I wrote: “Dimitris is seven. He attends the second grade in a school in Athens. He is full of energy, full of questions, full of need to explore the world around him. However, it seems recently that his favorite activity is hanging around, occasionally also bursting into girls’ washrooms! Moreover, he seems interested in discovering what is underneath girls’ skirts, Maria’s in particular! This activity, however, seems to “disturb” many people in Dimitris’ school community. The girls are disturbed, the girls’ parents also, the teachers are worried, and on top of that his friends and classmates are questioning his activities. Dimitris soon realizes that what is a “game” for him, has just turned to a “war”! Maria’s father severely tells him not to approach his daughter any more. The principal calls his parents in a meeting. Some teachers reprimand him; however, others seem somehow more friendly and gentle with him. Some of his friends find his activities “cool” and some others dismiss them as boring. Parents are talking over the whole incident and his parents seem confused. Nobody seems to know what to do. The whole school appears in a conflict” (Gerouki, 2008, p. 5).

eral understanding of the provision of school sex education in Greece as inherently problematic. In the course of this work, however, I came to regard sex education as a suppressed, marginalised educational area within the Greek context in the sense that its provision was overpowered by decisions made elsewhere than in the classroom, but which did have an imminent affect on classroom practice. This perception, along with a personal affiliation with the importance of applying knowledge for change resulted in adopting a transformative approach to the research as well.

The transformative-emancipatory perspective is change-oriented. That is, emphasis is put on the need to direct our society towards a more democratic and just end. In order for that to happen, certain conditions should be accepted. In particular, researchers should recognise the historical and political context of social experience. They regard the construction of knowledge as biased by individual interests, especially of those in power. Exposing the hegemonic, power relationships that dominate society and form social inequalities is regarded as the first step towards emancipation (Mertens, 2008).

In that sense, researching the experience of minority groups whose voice had been traditionally ignored or marginalised becomes important. In terms of this research project, minority status is accorded to those few teachers who against all odds decided to develop and implement a sex education program (see Study III). Empowering these groups is regarded as a condition that leads eventually to desirable societal change (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Mertens, 2008).

Within this perspective, this work also has aspirations in critical theory and critical pedagogy. Critical theory, unlike problem-solving theory that does not challenge the world and the institutions but treats them as a frame for action, approaches this frame as inherently problematic, challenges the prevailing order and aims to uncover those mechanisms that produce change in social settings. Human conditions are recognised as constructed in a societal frame by human means, and one thus subject to change. Central to the formation of critical scientific reasoning is a critique of commonly-shared assumptions and the exposure of certain perceptions as inherently “ideological” that is, perceptions that appear to be valid and true for everybody without necessarily being so (Ingram, 1990; Giroux, 2002).

The aims of critical social theory are emancipatory, practice-oriented and committed to change towards a better, more just society; emancipatory because it aims to empower people, especially those in a marginal position, allowing themselves to assume control of their lives; practice-oriented in the sense that it attacks problems pertaining to people’s everyday practices but also proposes solutions to them (Comstock, 1982; Gibson, 1986; Ingram,

1990; Tripp, 1992; Blake & Masschelein, 2003; Leonardo, 2004; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Kincheloe, 2007). Research in this context is seen as striving towards a transformative end, whereas the researcher is recognised as an activist whose goal is to challenge common beliefs and actively contribute to a better society (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005).

The engagement of critical theorization with issues of enlightenment and emancipation draws the attention of educators (Blake & Masschelein, 2003). Schools, seen from the critical pedagogical point of view, are institutions that legitimize and promote dominant constructions of social life. Inherent in this conceptualization is the understanding of schooling as a process that takes place in a particular cultural-historical context and is informed by decisions reflecting and satisfying specific political needs or intentions (McLaren, 2002). Critical pedagogy as an educational theory and practice thus aims to uncover hegemonic, ideological underpinnings of the educational process and content through a dialectical process. The goal is for learners to challenge current oppressive social and educational conditions through critical consciousness; and engage the members of the educational community in practices that encourage social change towards a democratic, egalitarian society.

3.2 Key concepts of the research project

This work recognizes sexuality as the domain of pedagogical reflection and intervention. Conceptions however, often are structured around particular interpretations. In that sense, it is important to acknowledge and clarify the broader ideas that informed this doctoral project. The aim is to facilitate understanding of the perspectives that this work is built upon.

Sexuality touches upon the physical, emotional, spiritual and interpersonal development of every person. It is seen as a fundamental part of the individual's perception and expression of self as a human being. The way a person perceives him or herself, being female or male as well as the physical activity between persons involving parts of their bodies, especially the genitalia, for reproductive reasons, pleasure, or both, is part of a broader concept of human sexuality (Rathus et al., 2002; Herdt & Howe, 2007). Sexuality influences personal thoughts, emotions, feelings, interactions and thereby the individual's mental and physical health. Sexuality is expressed in the context of society as a characteristic and quality of human identity. It is also shaped and constructed within those same social frames (Herdt & Howe, 2007) influenced by historical and sociocultural parameters (Foucault, 1978; Weeks,

1985, 1990). Thus, within every community, there is a diversity of personal and social moral beliefs, values, and ethics related to sexuality.

Sexual behaviour can be defined as the range of activities that express sexuality. As a manifestation of social life, sexual behaviour is, at the same time, influenced, constructed and reconstructed by the same context. In other words, socio-political mechanisms determine sexual life in the context of a couple, in the family, at school, and in society and culture.

Sexual literacy that concentrates on the positive side of sexuality is defined as “the ways in which people become knowledgeable and healthier sexual beings” (Herdt & Howe, 2007). Sexual health encompasses those cognitive, affective and social aspects of sexuality in ways that benefit the general health and well-being of the individual. The World Health Organization defined *sexual health* as “the integration of the physical, emotional, intellectual, and social aspects of sexual being in ways that are positively enriching, and that enhance personality, communication and love” (Lottes, 2000, p. 13). Sexual health is achieved by making informed decisions regarding sexual and reproductive behaviour within the framework of societal and personal ethics.

Sexual literacy is also seen as a fundamental element of the formation of the sexual citizen (Trimble, 2009). The concept of *sexual citizenship* deals with aspects of human agency that to an extent retain their private status, but, like other types of citizenship, such as civics, “is about enfranchisement, about inclusion, about belonging, about equity and justice, about rights balanced by new responsibilities” (Weeks, 1998, p. 39). In that sense, sexual citizenship also becomes an issue of public concern and part of a political discourse. Moreover, as such, notions of sexual citizenship are regulated by social policies and governmental practices (Richardson, 2000; Rhoads & Calderone, 2007).

Sexual literacy as an interrelated aspect of sexual citizenship is regarded in this work as the overall aim of sex and relationships education. The Sex Education Forum (UK) defines *sex and relationships education* as “learning about sex, sexuality, emotions, relationships, sexual health and ourselves.” As a pedagogical intervention, sex and relationships education targets school-age populations and attempts to enhance knowledge, as well as create attitudes, beliefs, values and skills that will have a positive impact on young people’s sexual health and well-being.

Sexuality, sexual health, sexual literacy, sexual citizenship, and sex education as concepts refer to the specific dimension or content that this work was built on. However, postgraduate research work, beside its learning outcome, is undoubtedly a learning process. Kegan (2000) makes the distinction between learning as *informative* and learning as *transformative*. For Mezirow

(1997, 2000), transformative learning takes place when previous personal assumptions and preconceptions are critically re-examined. Such a process, involving cognitive as well as affective elements, enhances understanding and results in creating more successful courses of action. In line with the above, this work, which is informative in parts, also aspires to have an overall personal transformative impact.

By problematizing our actions, by considering them as objects for reflection and applying both critical and creative operations (which clearly must be learned) to such actions in order to transform our future actions, we are brought into being—a being that is fundamentally ethical (Infinito, 2003, p. 161).

Reflexivity as the sense-making process is recognized as an important element of this research process. Within this work, reflexivity is regarded as the mental process formed from critical self-reflection and questioning of personal viewpoints and affiliations. Reflexivity in that sense encourages self-awareness and critical self-construction or re-construction, within a dialogically informed framework.

3.3 Sex education as politics and ethics: Schooling sexualities

Education as a public good is formed from particular conceptualizations about society and its members. Archard (1998) argued that although in general there is consensus on the need for sex education, nevertheless, such a provision becomes a problematic and controversial issue when the grounds that justify sex education teaching are in need of clarification. In his own words, “the different reasons why people think sex ought to be taught will make a difference to their views as to how sex ought to be taught” (Archard, 1998, p. 438).

Educational goals are decided on political grounds, however (Labaree, 1997). For Dewey, education as a social function is tied to particular societal goals and aims. In his own words, “the conception of education as a social process and function has no definite meaning until we define the kind of society we have in mind” (Dewey, 1997, p. 97). In that sense, education can be seen as representative of the dominant politics of a society’s institutions and sex education as reflecting the sexual politics of those institutions (Thomson, 1993). A number of standards that regulate human sexual activity are indeed a matter of public debate and expressed in the form of political legislation (some indicative examples include the legal age of consent—for heterosexual

and homosexual relationships, rape within marriage, abortion rights, and so on).

Political conflicts over specific legislation that regulates the provision and content of sex education are not uncommon (Thomson, 1993; McKay, 1999; Measor et al., 2000; Blake & Katrak, 2002; Alldred & David, 2007). As Thomson (1993, p. 221) writes “historically the evolution of public policy around sexuality mirrors wider social anxieties concerning nationhood, social change and social stability”. In general, sociocultural constructions and assumptions of childhood innocence as sexual innocence, that is, regarding children as inherently asexual beings, as well as disagreements over the rights of adolescents to regulate their own sexuality and sexual behaviour, have been at the heart of discussions over the need, content, and methods of provision, of school-based sex education (Levesque, 2000; Measor et al., 2000; Alldred & David, 2007; Allen, 2008).

Discussing sex, sexuality and relationships is doubtless a sensitive issue. Sexuality touches upon the most private aspects of the personality. “While sexuality involves anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry, it also includes self-concept, gender role, relationships, life-styles, religious beliefs, societal mores, and much more” (Koch, 1992, p. 252). This special values dimension, however, is the particular quality that distinguishes sex education from mere instruction (Halstead & Waite 2001, p. 59). Tensions and conflicting attitudes raised during the debate for the development and implementation of sex education programs can thus be attributed to the value-laden nature of the subject: “all disagreements about practice in sex education can be traced back to incompatible and conflicting values” (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 11).

According to Oxford Reference online, *values* are defined as “a set of ethical beliefs and preferences that determine our sense of right and wrong”, while *ethics* are seen as “moral principles that govern a person’s behaviour or the conducting of an activity”. In that sense, sexual behaviour, as one aspect of human behaviour, reflects individual ethical codes that are shaped in a societal value-system context.

Values are not self-evident entities, however. Rather, any value-system is framed within a particular socio-historical and cultural context. In that sense, conceptualizing ethics as resulting from a communicative, dialogical process, instead of being founded on fixed, universal moral principles facilitates an understanding of the world in its diversity, but also promotes an awareness of the self in its complex, multiple-constructed, subjective entity (Christians, 2003; Irvine et al., 2004; Piper, 2004).

European countries, Greece among them, are transforming into culturally diverse, pluralistic communities in which different ideologies and moral atti-

tudes are at play. In addition, everyday life is organized around democratic principles of government that demand that the voice of the different stakeholders be heard and taken in consideration in any situation. Those two conditions, that is, the multicultural and the democratic organization of life extends to the educational world. The introductory part of the *New Greek Curriculum* refers

to the contemporary phenomena of the internationalization of cultures and globalization of economies that create a social environment which is founded on a variety of cultural, lingual, national and socioeconomic characteristics. Seen in this light, it is important to minimize phenomena of single-culture domination but also phenomena of xenophobia and racism (National Gazette, 2003, p. 3733).

The same document points to the need to design an educational system that aims to promote

those conditions that secure for every student the development of his personality with strong self-esteem and emotional stability, critical and dialectical capability, as well as positive disposition for cooperation and self-development; a personality which is responsible, democratic and free, with social and humanistic values, without religious and cultural prejudices (National Gazette, 2003, p. 3734).

Sex education is recognized by the Greek Ministry of Education as “a pedagogical tool that can provide not only accurate information but also contribute to developing responsible attitudes and behaviours” (Merakou et al., 2000, p. 12). What are considered as responsible attitudes and behaviours at a given time, however, is decided by the predominant societal values. Societal values influence perceptions of what defines the extent and content of sex education. In that sense, “values permeate the whole process of sex education” (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 8).

As Weeks (1990, p. 100) wrote:

If we regard sex as dangerous, disruptive and fundamentally antisocial then we are likely to embrace moral and political positions which propose tight, authoritarian regulation. This I shall call the absolutism position. If, on the other, hand, we believe that the powers of desire are basically benign, life-enhancing and liberating we are liable to adopt a relaxed, even radical set of values, to support a libertarian stance.

McKay in *Sexual Ideology and Schooling* (1999) discusses two dominant antithetical sexual ideologies, the *restrictive* and the *permissive*, as fundamental in understanding the oppositional viewpoints that the content of sex education, as school based activity, raises. Ideology is seen as a system of

beliefs and ideas founded on values. Developing approaches to ideology critique are important in critical theory. As a matter of fact, it is seen as a goal of critical theorists to reveal the ideological underpinnings of common assumptions (Ingram, 1990, p. xxiv). “Sexual ideology refers to an individual’s beliefs and attitudes regarding the regulation and expression of sexual conduct” (Troiden & Platt-Jendrek, in McKay 1999, p. 36). In this way, ideological underpinnings on the subject of sex education become apparent and therefore a point of reflection.

According to McKay (1999) beliefs affiliated with a restrictive sexual ideology, (mainly, but not necessarily, inspired by religious origins) regard human sexuality as predominantly negative, potentially corrupting, and plausibly harmful in an emotional, physical, or psychological way that should be restricted and controlled. Ethical codes that govern such an ideology restrain sexual activity within the boundaries of procreation, or otherwise by clear defined borders (such as an exclusive relationship, for example). In such a light, children and young people (the target group of school sex education) are seen as not in need of intervention (which should be the duty of parents or religion representatives) or alternatively, in need of limited sex education—basically education that builds around messages of abstinence, as a response to the AIDS threat.

Alternatively, as McKay (1999) continues, from the viewpoint of permissive sexual ideology, human sexuality is seen as a positive element of human nature that has the potential to contribute to individual perceptions of well-being and self-fulfilment.¹⁷ Such approaches, indicative of changes in philosophical and scientific thought, represent a shift to “a concept of human nature that is dynamic rather than fixed, evolutionary rather than theological” (McKay, 1999, p. 53). The ethics underpinning a permissive ideology, along with promoting the separation of morality and law (de-penalisation of adultery, or same-sex relationships, for example), emphasize secular values such as equality and justice and take a rather person-centred viewpoint, stressing individual responsibility along with the right to decide what is right or wrong.

For Weeks (1990, p. 100) there is a third option, that of a *liberal-pluralist* approach to sexuality. This approach recognizes the defects of any extremity

¹⁷ Seen from the viewpoint of critical theorists such as Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse, sexual repression that is propagated by restrictive ideologies is fundamental to social oppression (Ingram, 1990). Thus, Marcuse argues that human liberation from oppressive societal functions could result from sexual liberation. In his own words, “In a world of alienation, the liberation of Eros would necessarily operate as a destructive, fatal force – as the total negation of the principle which governs the repressive reality” (Marcuse, 1956, p. 95). For the same philosopher such a *transformation of the libido* will result in the self-realization of individuals, thus creating the conditions for a happier, more fulfilling existence (Marcuse, 1956).

without necessarily treating types of sexual behaviour as either good or bad. As McKay (1999, p. 113) noted, following a similar line of thought “the right to hold a given moral belief does not translate into a complementary right to try to impose that belief on others or society at large.”

Halstead and Reiss (2003, p. 58) refer to “liberal values including autonomy, equality, freedom, respect, fairness, personal security, responsibility and freedom of choice” as a basis for developing sex education interventions. Similarly, Archard (1998, p. 447) argues for introducing approaches to sex education that “maximize the citizen’s autonomy”; that is, individuals who are able to make informed sexual choices and are aware of the diversity of choices available. In the same way McKay (1999) advocates the use of democratic principles to assert thinking about sexuality and consequently sex education.

In the context of a democratic, pluralistic society therefore, children and adolescents are recognised as sexual beings in need of comprehensive sex education (McKay, 1999); that is, education that reinforces young people’s decision-making skills; provides information about contraception and other safe sex practices; moves beyond biology and anatomy to tackle issues of pleasure and sexual expression; and also takes into account the needs of individuals that belong to minority and sexual minority groups (McKay, 2000; Blake & Frances, 2001; Levine, 2002; Starkman & Rajani, 2002).

As I have argued in other parts of this work, the researcher’s viewpoints and personal dispositions are important in the research process. While theorizing about different sexual ideologies and how these inform educational practices, it became clear that I had to reflect on personal approaches to sexuality along with approaches to sex education. This was unavoidable in the sense that if there is no value-free sex education (see McKay, 1999; Halstead & Reiss, 2003) searching for value-free researchers or value-free teachers in that sense, is futile and misleading.

As a sex education researcher therefore, I agree that instructional tools for effective practices can be developed through comprehensive sex education programs. The focus in this work consequently, data collection as well as data analyses, were influenced by comprehensive sex education approaches that emphasize the benefits of abstinence while also teaching about contraception and disease-prevention methods (Starkman & Rajani, 2002). Within the comprehensive approach to sex education, abstinence is regarded as one of the choices available. Another pragmatic dimension of this choice comes from research evidence suggesting that abstinence-only programs (extremely popular and well funded in the US) that place sexual activity only within the marriage and promote abstinence as the only way to prevent disease, have not

been found successful (Blake & Frances, 2001; Levine, 2002, SIECUS annual reports; Hardy, 2009). They have not positively influenced young people's health as far as sexually transmitted diseases or the rate of teenage pregnancies are concerned (McKay, 2000; Blake & Frances, 2001; Starkman & Rajani, 2002). The evidence supporting the positive impact of abstinence programs to delaying sexual activity until marriage is also limited (Starkman & Rajani, 2002, p. 313; UNESCO, 2009).

3.4 Beneficial school-based sex education

Many researchers argue that sex education is most effective when given before a young person becomes sexually active (Poobalan et al., 2009). As Sears (1992, p. 25) explicitly states "the consequence of sexual illiteracy is sexually mature adolescents with intellectually immature sexual understandings." Addressing the issue early enough might be the path to healthy, responsible choices in the future. "Information given at the right age helps form sexual identity, supports self-esteem, and reduces risky behaviour" (Brandt et al., 2000, p. 98). Therefore, there is a strong consensus among students, teachers, parents and other experts as many studies indicate, for introducing sex and relationships education at an early stage of the educational system (Goldman & Goldman, 1982; Kakavoulis, 1995; Brandt et al., 2000; Halstead & Waite, 2001; Somers & Eaves, 2002; Somers & Surmann, 2005; Gerouki, 2008; Ferguson et al., 2008).

As various studies establish, securing pedagogically effective school-based sex and relationships education is a complex issue, mainly because a number of important factors should be taken into consideration (McKay, 2000; Milton, 2000, 2001; Halstead & Waite, 2001; Wight et al., 2001; Kirby, 2002a, 2002b; Lottes, 2002; Buston & Wight, 2002; Buston & Wight, 2006; Poobalan et al., 2009). Factors that influence effective development and implementation of sex education are context and content dependent (figure 3). Context-related factors involve the wider community, the particular school environment and the participants involved, whereas content-related conditions refer to planning the intervention and its underlying goals (Blake & Frances, 2001; Buston et al., 2001; Blake, 2002; Kirby, 2002b; Wight et al., 2001; UNESCO, 2009; Poobalan et al., 2009).

Psychosexual development is an integral part of children's overall development. In implementing sex education interventions, practitioners aim to generate a beneficial influence on children's lives at present, as well as in the future, as healthy and well-adjusted individuals.



Figure 3. Factors for effective school sex education

Children who are not educated about healthy sexuality are more at risk from exploitation and abuse (Goldman & Goldman, 1982; Milton, 2000). This phenomenon has two dimensions, however, involving both the victim and the offender. “The majority of patients with paraphilias—deviant sexual behaviours—described a strict anti-sexual upbringing in which sex was either never mentioned or was actively repressed or defiled” (Money, in Levine, 2002, p. 12). Fay and Medway (2006) report a decrease among participants in accepting rape myths following a rape prevention sex education program. Since sexual abuse is a traumatic experience for the victim, as well as an indication of the offender’s psychological disorder, the role of sex education is dual: on the one hand, it might act as a preventive step when based on healthy views of sex and sexuality and it might offer the child at risk the information and skills needed to understand and react to possible abuse attempts on the other

hand (Goldman & Goldman, 1982, p. 48). Issues of sexual and reproductive rights, questions of consent, trust, security, privacy and the like are part of the sex education curriculum. It is also possible that classroom discussions will help some children to find the help they deserve.

Research indicates that the provision of sex and relationships education which meets specific standards has a positive impact on the sexual health and overall well-being of students (Hubbard et al., 1998; Blake & Frances, 2001; DiCenso et al., 2002; Kirby, 2002a, 2002b; Somers & Eaves, 2002; Buston & Wight, 2002; Buston & Wight, 2006; UNESCO, 2009; Poobalan et al., 2009). There is no research evidence to suggest that provision of such programs contributes to the onset or frequency of sex, or the number of sexual partners (Kirby, 2001; Somers & Eaves, 2002; Kontula, 2004; Millhausen et al., 2008). Comprehensive sex education programs can increase knowledge, delay sexual intercourse, reduce the number of sexual partners and increase safe sex practices. Sex education programs also had a positive impact in reducing adolescent sexual risk-taking, unintended pregnancy, childbearing, and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, thus improving overall sexual health and well-being (Kirby, 2002b; Kontula, 2004). In contrast, young people who reported having more frequent sexual activity received most information on various sexuality related topics from sources like the media, peers, and family while being exposed to limited school sex education at the same time (Somers & Shurmann, 2005, p. 48).

Because of the accumulating data on the benefits of sex education in enhancing sexual and reproductive health and well-being, a number of organizations promote sex education as a human right. Therefore, a number of international conventions (for example, The Committee on the Rights of the Child, or The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) urge governments all over the world to “guarantee the rights of young people to health, life, education and non-discrimination, by making comprehensive sexuality education that is scientifically accurate, objective and free from prejudice and discrimination available to them in primary and secondary schools” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 7).

School-based sex education: an overview of programs

As a school-based intervention, sex education is important. On the one hand, as various studies support, children and young people want to learn about relationships, sex and sexuality (McKay, 2000; Halstead & Waite, 2001; Buston & Wight, 2004; Selwyn & Powell, 2007). Similarly, a number of Greek studies on the subject confirm young peoples’ interest in sex education

(Goliaris & Tzoura-Tzeveleki, 1994; Kakavoulis, 1995; Giannitsas et al., 1998; Kakavoulis & Forrest, 1999). On the other hand, children do not live in a sealed, protected world, and thus need help in learning how to process the many and different messages about sexuality they may receive each day from various sources.

Although the parental role is very important in educating children on sexuality issues, however, parental guidance on the subject is not always sufficient or unquestionable as studies, including Greek ones, demonstrate. Parents often feel uncomfortable in discussing sexuality issues with their children (Halstead & Waite, 2001; Kakavoulis, 2001; Walker & Milton, 2006; Kirana et al., 2007). Their knowledge of sexuality matters is also limited (Thomaidis et al., 1997; Kakavoulis, 2001). Moreover it was found that parents tend to gender differentiate their conversations and discuss different subjects with their sons and their daughters (Measor, 2004; Walker & Milton, 2006). In any case, the fact that for some children school may be their main source of accurate information and education regarding sexuality issues remains important.

Consequently, as a way to respond towards a number of sexual health related conditions in the young population and also to enhance healthy and informed choices, the majority of European countries offer in their education system school-based sex education at some point. However, as stated in the *IPPF European Network* report of 2006, integration of these programs into each country's school curriculum differs. Although sex education is a controversial issue in practically every country, a generally reported tendency is for such programs to progressively become more liberal and mandatory (Knerr, 2006).

As two of the writers of the *IPPF European Network* report state in a recent journal article, sex education in different European countries is being introduced at various stages of the school system, governed by different policies, offered under a range of instructional methods, and even names (Parker et al., 2009). It would be beyond the scope of this work to refer in detail to these various approaches to sex education. However, in an attempt to summarize the data of those two research papers, I would try to organise them into three major categories based on some important similarities (table 1).

Table 1. Sex Education teaching in various countries (an outline¹⁸).

| Central / Northern Europe (e.g., Scandinavian countries, Germany, UK, The Netherlands) | Mediterranean area (e.g., Spain, Portugal, Italy, Greece, Cyprus) | Eastern Europe (e.g., Bulgaria, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) |
|---|---|--|
| Relaxed attitude towards sexuality Early introduction of sex education teaching Human rights and health oriented approach | Highly influenced by dominant religion systems When mandatory, it is usually introduced at the secondary level Rather traditional and moralistic approach | Area for competing between secular and religious social institutions Non mandatory in most cases Selectively implemented and underfunded |

Nevertheless, I am obliged to make a comment about Greece at this point. As a matter of fact according to both publications (Knerr, 2006; Parker et al., 2009) sex education in Greece is offered via different teaching techniques and methods, despite being a controversial issue, throughout the primary and secondary school sector and has been mandatory since 1995. Moreover, it involves a number of practitioners (teachers, school nurses,¹⁹ and Family Planning Association members). This picture is totally antithetical to the picture that Studies I, II and III of this work describe. However, it can be explained by placing the sources of information under scrutiny; official paperwork, curricula and directives accessed by outsiders on the one hand as opposed to research data from first-line practitioners on the other. Reality is a matter of interpretation after all.

Research methods serve the research purposes and not the other way round. The next chapter presents a mixed-method research design. Quantitative and qualitative research data have been collected and analysed as part of

¹⁸ The use of the geographical term for naming the categories here is very broad and not absolutely precise. For example, Portugal is included (and I could also include Ireland) in the Mediterranean area, although obviously they are not. However, this kind of geographical classification met the classification needs better (and it was safer) than other terms coined from political or religious terms. In any case, since this table is an attempt to summarize such a broad and diverse subject like the provision of sex education in various European countries, it should be approached having this in mind. A full and detailed presentation on the subject can be found in the *IPPF European Network* report, (Knerr, 2006).

¹⁹ I doubt that there is any school in the public sector that employs a school nurse (most of them are struggling to pay the cleaning personnel and the part-time teachers. In those terms, a nurse is considered luxury). Such health professionals however might be found in the private sector (which, however, represents less than 10% of the schools).

the overall research study. The chapter also describes the process that informed the research endeavour.

4 Methods and Data

This dissertation was based on conducting multiple studies using a mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). In particular, this work involves collecting, analysing and reporting quantitative and qualitative data on the topic of primary school sex and relationships education in Greece in four distinct phases (figure 4).

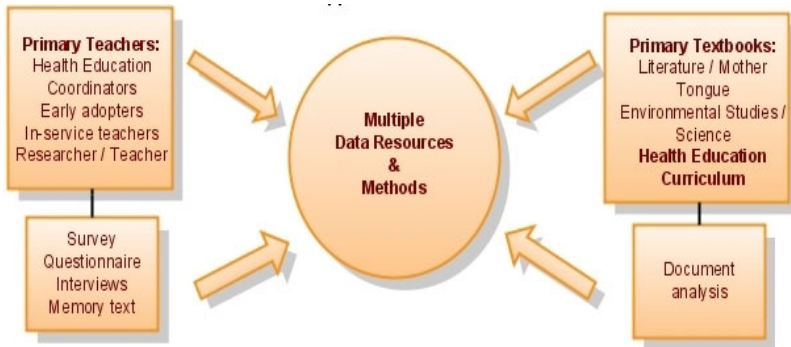


Figure 4. Multiple methods and multiple sources

Research approaches that rely on the use of mixed (qualitative and quantitative) methods have been receiving increased attention in the academic world (Newman & Benz, 1998; Creswell, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2008), to the point of being recognised as a third methodological movement by its own standards (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003; Gorard & Taylor, 2004).

Underlying the mixed-methods approach is the understanding that both quantitative and qualitative methods can approach the same research problems in a different way (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). For Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2008), the emergent methods in research came as a response to the current scientific environment, which is characterised by interdisciplinarity and is influenced by multiple socio-economic, political and technological factors. A flexible combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches might provide a better, more ample understanding of scientific problems than either approach can achieve separately. In general, researchers are able to overcome dichotomies that function in a limiting manner by using a mixed-methods approach and can take advantage of particular strengths in both re-

search disciplines using the one to overcome the weaknesses of the other. Additionally, they have at their disposal a larger set of research tools and are able to derive a broader understanding of the research endeavour in general (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Plano Clark et al., 2008). Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003, p. 15) refer to three major arguments for supporting the superiority of mixed methods research designs over single ones. In particular, by using mixed methods researchers can explore a wider spectrum of research questions, arrive at stronger conclusions, and offer diverse viewpoints.

In the case of this project, the benefit of conducting research based on multiple studies derives from the possibility that a multiple-studies method allows one to collect and build up research progressively. Thus, I regard the four studies that comprise this work as distinct steps of the research process, as separate inferences in an ongoing dialogue. The first informs the rest and all of them are intended to understand what is perceived as a problematic provision of sex education in Greece.

4.1 Multiple studies: Development and implementation

To collecting the data for this work I have followed a sequential explanatory strategy (Creswell, 2003; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008; Plano Clark et al., 2008). In this way, quantitative data are collected and analysed first. The initial quantitative data analysis leads to collecting and analysing qualitative data as well. The role of a sequential explanatory process is to use qualitative information in order to follow up, explain further, and interpret the preliminary quantitative findings (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 50).

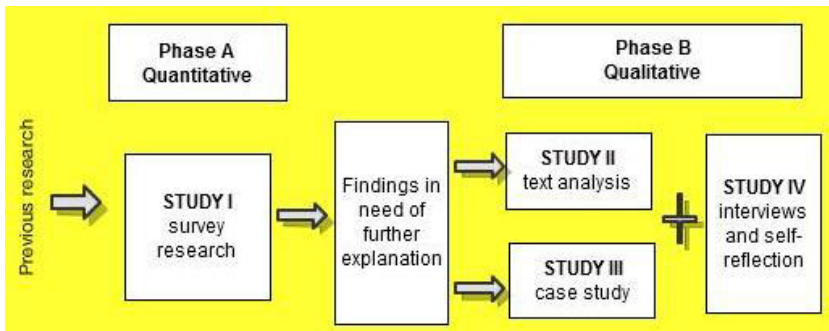


Figure 5. Multiple studies: Sequential Explanatory Process

In the case of this doctoral project, qualitative data was collected to confirm, explain, and open up further dimensions originally identified and discussed in the findings of the quantitative study. As figure 5 shows, the first study (of the four that comprise this project) was conducted quantitatively. However, as I have already elaborated on in other parts of this work, previous research endeavour (quantitative as well) also directed my research decisions and choices to a certain extent.

4.1.1 Phase A: The quantitative approach

Thus, the first study of this doctoral project (Study I) was designed to shed some light on the current situation of sex education teaching in Greek primary school. The first research study aimed to:

- explore which of the seven health education thematic units received special attention from teachers in developing health education projects.
- see if there was a significant difference in the selection preferences among the various topics.
- identify respondents' opinions on the reasons that obstruct teachers in selecting *Sex and Relationships Education*, as opposed to the reasons that make them favour other thematic units.
- find out the extent of teachers' awareness of the possibility of implementing sex education projects, as well as of the materials available for this purpose.

Since the targets of the study were “to describe the nature of the existing conditions” regarding health education programs in the Greek primary schools and “identify the standards against which those conditions can be compared” (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 169), a survey research design was considered as most appropriate. “Survey responses are thought to mirror the nature of the social world under investigation at the moment of the investigation” (Hutchinson, 2004, p. 287).

Data for that study came from an anonymous survey questionnaire distributed during February–March 2005 to the 68 elementary school health education coordinators in Greece. Among the emerging themes of that first study my attention was particularly drawn to two: the role of textbooks in program selection, and the need for evaluative research on early adopters, that is, the few teachers who had already implemented sex education programs (figure 6).

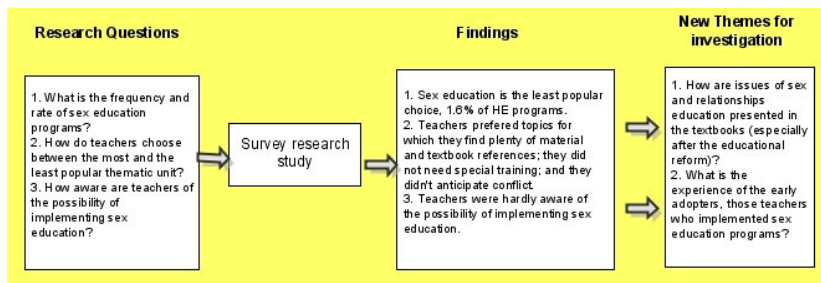


Figure 6. From the research questions to the new themes for investigation (STUDY I)

According to findings of the first study, the visibility of a topic in the school textbooks prompted teachers to select this topic for programs development, and the reverse. In the light of the new curriculum and the new primary textbooks that were introduced following the reform of 2001–2003, the question of the place of sex and relationships issues in these new textbooks became crucial.

However, as the data of the first study showed, there were some sex education programs implemented two years after the educational reform (33 out of about 2066 health education programs). Thus, investigating the relevant experience of teachers could have provided further material and arguments for sex education program implementation. It has been found that teachers' attitudes and abilities to implement controversial and innovative curricula such as sexuality education are essential ingredients in program success. Moreover, approval of sexuality education programs by the community, schools, and parents is negated if a teacher is not prepared or willing to carry out the program in the classroom (Bowden et al., 2003, p. 782).

This rationale provided the direction for the next two studies of this doctoral project.

4.1.2 Phase B: The qualitative studies

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) approach qualitative research methods as ways we make sense of the world, interpretative in nature, with transformative power, flexible in use, which offer multiple possibilities for capturing the phenomena under investigation. Thus, the second phase of this doctoral project was built on two research endeavour, both of which came as a response to particular claims in the first study.

On the one hand, respondents of the first study made it quite clear that textbooks and other educational material were very important for their prac-

tices. In the light of the new textbook development, an enquiry into their content would have proven useful for the ongoing discussion on effective sex and relationships school programs. Using documents as a research source is not uncommon in the social sciences (Altheide et al., 2008; Prior, 2008). On the other hand, one of the suggestions of the first study was that the experience of teachers who had already been involved in such programs should be made more apparent and become the focus of further investigation. Their experience could have provided a guideline for future developments.

Study II

The second study of this postgraduate program (Study II) investigated how the two broader content units of sex and relationships education, namely, the “human body” and “human relationships”, as defined in the National Curriculum of Health Education, were represented in the primary textbooks. Specifically, three objectives were established:

- To present and discuss visual and textual textbook representations of the human body, especially its gender characteristics.
- To show and discuss how questions of the development of the secondary gender characteristics, human reproduction and sexual health (HIV, AIDS, STDs) are being dealt with in the textbooks.
- To show and discuss the types of human relationship represented in the textbooks.

The study sample comprised the primary school student and workbooks on ‘Literature’ (for the six grades), ‘Greek’ (for grades, 1, 3, 5, 6) and ‘Environmental studies’ (for grades 1, 2, 3, 4) / ‘Science’ (for grades 5, 6) as well as the corresponding teacher’s books. The sample was selected on the basis that all books were developed following the latest educational reform and introduced during 2006–2007 school year in all primary schools throughout the country.

Study III

The third part of this work was a case study. “The case study is the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context. Such a phenomenon may be a *project* or *program* in an evaluation study” (Yin, 1993, p. 3). Stake (1995, p. 3) discusses two different types of case study research. He calls *intrinsic case study* the research design that at-

tempts to understand a particular case or phenomenon, for example, the learning difficulties of a particular student. He then refers to *instrumental case study* to characterise the case study design for a particular case, aiming to understand situations beyond the case itself. In this manner, case study research is used to bring insight to a situation, research question or phenomenon under investigation.

Thus Study III, as an instrumental case study design, discussed a joint sex education program conducted in 2003–2004 in two schools of the same geographical district in Greece. The particularly focus of that study was:

- How the two teachers discussed their overall experience.
- What the enhancing factors were for undertaking such program.
- What the negative and positive elements of their intervention were.
- What the impact of their intervention on all members involved was (themselves, the pupils and their families).

The data for discussing this intervention was built on interviews with the teachers (two separate semi-structured interviews), the unpublished teachers' report for the local Health Education office, as well as pupils' material (drawings and a play) produced as part of the program. These were kindly provided by the teachers in the program for the research. In this work, the case study research was used as a tool aiming both to make the experience of teachers more visible in order to use it in the argument for the provision of sex and relationships education, and as a preliminary evaluation of a sex education project.

Study IV

While involved with my doctoral project, it became apparent to me that teachers' experiences could offer important insights for my research purposes. According to Mezirow (1996) experience is a core element of learning. In his own words, "we learn together by analyzing the related experiences of others to arrive at a common understanding that holds until new evidence or arguments present themselves" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 7). In general, the teachers' personal attitude to the subject of sex education has been recognized as basic to the potential application of any such program (Bowden et al., 2003). Moreover, as Kehily (2002b, p. 215) suggests in her work "teachers' biographies and personal experiences play a significant part in shaping and giving meaning to the pedagogical styles they adopt". Consequently, shedding light

on the experiences of Greek teachers on the matter of sexuality and sex education is important for the development and implementation of adequate sex and relationships education programs, as well as for designing appropriate in-service teacher training.

Educational research done critically takes into consideration ‘how teachers and students come to understand their own school experiences, and how knowledge and school culture are implicated in the domination of the mind and the body’ (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1987, p. 148). Thus, by the time the third study (the case study) was submitted for reviewing I had also collected material (mainly from semi-structured interviews, see Appendix C) from twenty primary school teachers, centred on teachers’ perceptions of children’s sexual related behaviours and / or questions, and their relative experiences. For this I used purpose and snowballing sample-collecting techniques. At the same time, I went through a *bracketing interview*²⁰ with a colleague. Finally, I started keeping a *research journal* in which I noted thoughts, feelings, memories and other important reflections.

The first sentence of the journal was: *‘I have been working in education since 1993 and since 1994 I have had a permanent position as primary school teacher.’* At a later point, I added the comment *teacher / researcher*. A pattern started to appear, and two self-perceptions (myself as a teacher and myself as a researcher of education) already there, competed for recognition. The use of language in those diaries had been an interesting feature as well. Adopting different voices to constructing text concerning memories is another form of literal expression (Mitchell & Weber, 1999, p. 61). My free associations, thoughts and memories from my own teaching were written in my mother tongue, the language of the interviews, the language of *the teacher*. However, the comments like the one above and the reflections on the written texts, mine or the interviews’ transcripts, were made in English, the language of *the researcher*.

The interview process as such has also been recognized as an opportunity for self-critical reflection and a sort of assessment. Krieger (1991, pp.159–164) describes her interviewing experiences as situations in which a sense of economy prevails, in the sense that the voice of the researcher is expected to be minimal in order to provide space for the interviewee. This conscious attempt at self-denial on the researcher’s part, however, was, a painful experi-

²⁰ Underlying this process, which demands that the researcher first to go through the same interview protocol that she intends to use with her research participants is a recognition of the researcher as an individual with certain viewpoints and perspectives that should be explicitly addressed since they cannot be negated (Pollio & Humphreys, 1996, p. 101). Such practices result in enhanced awareness of the researcher’s personal standpoint in relation to those of her research participants (Queen Smith, 1998, p. 83).

ence for Krieger. Similarly, during the interviewing I felt that as a researcher I was giving my research participants a voice, but at the same time my own voice as a teacher needed to be heard. Therefore, at the end of an interview, I sometimes found myself wanting to write down my own impressions as I realised that my informants' stories triggered recollections of my own teaching experiences.

Sears (1992, p. 147) said that "Qualitative research is an inquiry into the personal worlds of others that, if one is fortunate, becomes a journey into oneself." While progressing with my interviews and diary, it became clear that I had to find a basis for "embracing" my two identities. Additionally, I realized the need to be self-reflective and self-critical in order to negotiate and come to terms with procedural issues, questions and topics selection that arose during the research process.

Research in the critical tradition takes the form of self-conscious criticism—self-conscious in the sense that researchers try to become aware of the ideological imperatives and epistemological presuppositions that inform their research as well as their own subjective, intersubjective, and normative reference claims (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2005, p. 305).

Thus, the last study of this work approached research as an embodied endeavour and argued in favour of a method that permits the researcher a degree of self work and critical self-reflection; moreover, regarding such undertaking as an important dimension for understanding the whole research project.

During the one hour of our interviews, teachers brought up many aspects of and issues relative to the interview topic (see Gerouki, 2007b). The choice of examining flirting situations in school settings, especially students vis-à-vis teachers that is, the stories for the fourth study that completes this work was influenced by personal experiences as I explicitly mention there (see Study IV), but also by an understanding that although these kind of stories are not often discussed in academic situations, they are not infrequent. Nevertheless, if the educational goal is for the teacher to become a competent sex educator, then understanding school settings as places where various sexual discourses exist and influence behaviour and perceptions is crucial.

4.2 Considerations on and limitations of the research

Fine et al., (2003) approach the entire research process as a sequence of dilemmas or ethical considerations that the researcher should reflect upon and

make explicit before, during and after their work. Thus, a dialogical process has been acknowledged as key component in addressing ethical issues. Underlying those issues there is a need to write and publish pieces of work done in a scientific manner that serve community purposes. In their own words “not only to generate new knowledge but to reform ‘common sense’ and inform critically public policies, existent social movements, and daily community life” (Fine et al., 2003, p. 196). In order to approach research as an endeavour directed by principles of social responsibility, Fine et al., (2003) refer to ten core issues or questions that should be desiderara for any researcher. These issues can be grouped into four categories: about the researcher; the research participants; the research methods; and the research outcome. Consequently, the researcher assumes the position of a biographically situated individual whose decisions regarding data collection and analysis inform the research outcome to an important extent, and who possesses a clear vision of how her studies should be used. The research subjects are treated as research co-participants who have the ability to validate the findings. The research methods should vary, representing different aspects of analysis. Finally, the research outcome should challenge existing common beliefs and dominant discourses and treat all aspects of life, even the more ordinary ones, as valuable research material (Fine et al., 2003, pp. 199–201).

During this research process, as is also separately discussed in the research papers, care was taken to address ethical considerations and work along the lines prescribed. Particularly, keeping research participants, health education coordinators and primary teachers (Studies I, III, IV) anonymous and treating their stories confidentially was a condition made explicit right from the beginning of each study. Moreover, respondent validation of the results of the first study was received (Study I). In addition, teachers, the informants of this work, had my full contact details and were welcome to have a look at the final text before this makes its way to the editor (although I have to admit no one showed such an interest). Research participants were selected by purposive sampling techniques (Studies III, IV). This was justified by the nature and content of the research, in the sense that particular individuals had experienced the issue concerned, and thus were more ready to discuss these experiences.

A limitation of this work can be seen in the number of respondents (Studies III, IV). Sears (1992, p. 148) however, argued that “the power of qualitative data lies not in the number of people interviewed but in the researcher’s ability to know well a few people in their cultural contexts”. The response rate (50%) for the first study (Study I) was also acknowledged as a limitation and justified by the prevailing situation at the time in Greece (see Study I, p.

53). The accuracy of findings regarding the examination of the textbooks and other official documents on sex education (Study II) was attained by providing a rich description of the materials used, as well as of the research process and analysis. Finally, the fact that the case study (Study III) was developed based on materials and interviews from the teachers of the program, without accessing the experience of the students who were involved, can be recognized as a limitation of that work as well.

As Freire (1998, p. 44) affirms “critical understanding leads to critical action”. A challenging part of this work was my role as teacher-researcher. Being, familiar with both your research field and participants as a researcher, is not uncommon in educational research. Moreover, a position as an insider might help in solving a range of practical problems such as easier access to people and documents (Sikes & Potts, 2008; Portelli, 2008; Vicars, 2008). In the case of this research project, it had been obvious that my position as a teacher facilitated my research endeavour to a significant extent. In other words, it was easier for me to approach health education coordinators and other teachers as a “colleague”, rather than as a “third party”. My status as a teacher also facilitated my access to paperwork such as internal communications between various educational offices and the Ministry of Education. Finally, a colleague-friend working in the Pedagogical Institute at the time helped me overcome a number of bureaucratic obstacles getting an official permission to publish textbook pictures as part of my research study (see Study II, p. 335). By saying this, I do not imply that even as a non-insider it would not have been legitimate to access public documents or talk with civil servants; however, I do also know that this would have taken an outsider twice the time and effort or more to accomplish.

However, researching *the familiar* also raises a number of questions, or limitations. As mentioned: “Trying to combine knowledge from being part of the team with critical distance compromises even action research” (Drake & Heath, 2008, p. 136). Tensions that usually arise in this type of research have to do with a range of credibility and bias issues (Smyth & Holian, 2008; Portelli, 2008; Vicars, 2008). In other words, in this kind of research, the complex interplay among subjective interpretations of the research choices and data on the one hand, as well as a commitment to conducting research following ethical principles on the other becomes apparent, and moreover, needs to be thoroughly addressed.

Thus issues of positionality, subjectivity and reflexivity became particularly important in this work. This discussion was made explicit through the construction of the last article (Study IV) and the inclusion of self-reflective texts as part of the research material. Here, the decision of the researcher to

become a research participant and openly deal with the implications posed by the research endeavour was seen as an effort to deal with a range of ethical considerations that researching a value-laden issue such as sex education is as well as to address those particular limitations that *researching from the inside* produces.

Foucault and Rabinow (1997) argued over the formation of an ethical self through a critical reconstruction of the individual. For Foucault, freedom was ethics in the sense that “freedom is dependent upon the ethical and that the ethical has everything to do with free action.” Moreover, “a consequence then of practicing liberty is that individuals begin to live ethically” (Infinito, 2003, p. 157). As a researcher, accepting to protect the anonymity of my research participants but expose myself was also seen as a sensitive issue that raised a number of thoughts during my engagement with this research project. Instead of blending my experience as a teacher along with other research data and hiding behind the anonymity of the participants, I consciously chose to put my name to my story. Anonymity, in my case as a teacher-researcher, was seen as pseudo-freedom and limiting element of the research study. However, self exposure, as the fourth study mentions (see also chapter 6.3) can become a liberating factor and significant element of the whole research endeavour, in terms of its outcomes. In that sense, embracing both identities and explicitly reflecting on them was found to be an appropriate course of action.

Different types of data (quantitative and qualitative) have been collected and analysed for the purposes of this doctoral project. A more detailed presentation of the findings of each study has been provided in the separate articles (Part II). The aim of the next chapter is to offer an overview of the main results in order for the reader to identify the interconnection between the four studies. This will also facilitate the discussion that follows.

5 Findings

Data for this project were provided by primary teachers (myself included), either speaking from the position of health education coordinator, or as in-service practitioners; as well as by examining official educational documents such as primary school textbooks and curricula. For the purpose of this research, different methods were used, particularly open-ended interviews, a questionnaire, self-reflection memory work and document analysis. The use of multiple methods influenced the collection of data from multiple sources, and vice-versa. In the following pages, I first present an overview of the findings of the four studies. I then introduce a synthesis of those findings. The synthetic critical reading aims to facilitate the discussion that follows.

5.1 Study I: Sex education in the Greek primary schools

The first study examined the frequency of sex education program implementation in the primary school, as well as factors that facilitate or obstruct program development from the view point of health education coordinators.

According to the data of the first study, 2,066 different health education projects were implemented in approximately 4,300 Greek primary schools during the 2003–2004 school year. Thirty-three (33=1.6%) of these projects were on a topic related to sex and relationships. The majority of the respondents (59%) answered that teachers in their district showed no interest at all in implementing sex education as part of health education activities.

As figure 7 shows, most of the health education coordinators stated that *Nutrition* was the most popular choice for health education program development, occupying places from 1 to 4, whereas *Sex and Relationships Education* occupied places 5 to 7 [1= most popular, to 7 = least popular]. Regarding *Sex and Relationships Education* programs, twenty-five of the respondents (73%), believed that teachers did not know at all, or were hardly aware, that this option for project development as well as some relative material existed.

When respondents were asked to point to the single most important factor that would encourage the adoption of *Sex and Relationships Education* for health education programs, most of them (58%) mentioned teacher training. The second important factor was that *Sex and Relationships Education* needs to be promoted adequately by the Ministry of Education. Creating educational material, as well as cooperation with the parents, was also mentioned.

None of the respondents, however, thought that *Sex and Relationships Education* should not be excluded as a thematic unit for health education programs.

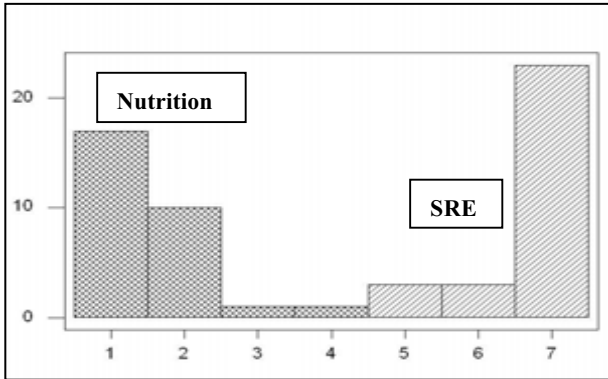


Figure 7. Nutrition versus Sex and Relationships Education in teachers' choices. Popular topics: (from 1= most popular, to 7 = least popular).

In general, *Sex and Relationships Education* was mentioned as the least popular category for health education programs implementation by 68% of the respondents (23 out of 34). Respondents generally characterized teaching about sex and relationships as “difficult” and the subject as “taboo,” in the sense that we do not openly speak about it and teachers feel embarrassed dealing with such issues in class. *Sex and Relationships Education* as a subject was also characterized as “dangerous,” in the sense that it might upset classroom practices while conflicts might be created with educational executives or parents.

5.2 Study II: Representations of the human body and relationships in the primary textbooks and curricula

The second study examined sex education representations in the primary school curriculum and in the new primary school textbooks.

Chapters that exclusively discuss “body awareness” and “bodily functions” are found throughout the six books and workbooks of environmental studies / science for grades 1, 4, 5 and 6. Opportunities for discussing the gender characteristics and differences in the human body are provided in the

1st grade where the aim is to familiarize pupils with their bodies and in the 6th grade, where the last chapter discusses the human reproductive system.

First grade pupils get to know their bodies by pointing out and naming different parts of the body. However, there is no reference to the genitals in the student's book, the workbook or any suggestion for discussing the genitals in the teacher's book. This trend is followed by the visual material of the book, in which a drawing of a boy and a girl is provided as a visual teaching aid. However, both children are dressed (Appendix B). Visual representations of naked bodies, especially female bodies, are avoided in all grades. On the whole, there are three pictures of naked male bodies (ancient statues, in the 1st and 3rd grades) but the female body is represented naked only in an abstract, artistic way twice in the 1st grade (Appendix B). Gender characteristics of the human body like the female and male genitals and even the female breasts become invisible throughout the primary textbooks of environmental studies / science. No chapter discusses the appearance of secondary gender characteristics either.

The last chapter on science in the last grade of primary school, which is about the human reproductive system, describes the biological phenomenon of the reproduction of human species in an informative manner. However, the authoring team of the textbook recognising their limited, fragmented approach suggest that teachers should omit this chapter altogether.

There is also a chapter about transmitted diseases in the science textbook for the 6th grade but there is no mention of hepatitis B, or HIV / AIDS, among other diseases. Nevertheless, in the teachers' book there is one sentence mentioning that sexual contact with contaminated persons or transfusion of contaminated blood are the ways of spreading AIDS and hepatitis B. AIDS, however, is mentioned as a potential topic for project development because of the international AIDS day in the environmental studies curriculum of the 4th grade. Sexual health issues, proper genitals hygiene, safe sex practices and so on are not mentioned at all. In the textbooks for literature / Greek there are a few texts about health, the body and body functions but the focus is mainly on nutrition, tooth hygiene and physical exercise.

The second study also focused on those relationships that facilitate and encourage close emotional and physical contact between people. The target was thus to explore whether references to "romantic relationships" are made either as part of discussing family issues or as part of social interactions.

Texts about family and family life, as well as visual representations are found often throughout the textbooks; however, there is no reference to attraction issues and emotions that bring people together to form a family in the first place. Children are treated as the fundamental element of a family in all

textbooks. Childless couples are not depicted or even mentioned. The couple as the bond of two humans who share intimacy, experiences, emotions of all kinds, as well as financial resources without necessarily reproducing simply does not exist. The heart of family relationships is the mother-child relationship. Messages that regard the female as the main person responsible for child well-being and treat the mother as the prime caregiver, placing fatherhood and the father in a marginal position seem also to prevail.

Relationships in the environmental studies textbooks are approached mainly at the classroom level (forming groups and cooperating in class) or the neighbourhood, local level (the responsibilities of an active citizen). There is one chapter in the environmental studies of the 3rd grade that discusses issues of gender equality. In the Greek textbooks, friendship is also discussed in some chapters but is presented mainly as friendship formation within a group of children. No suggestion of romantic friendship is made in either text. Finally, depictions of couples that imply a closer, romantic relationship are extremely rare.

5.3 Study III: The pedagogy of sex education

The third study was constructed from the experience of two primary school teachers who had developed and implemented a sex education program.

The findings show that there were three principal influences on the teachers' decision to develop and implement a sex education program: the good working relationship they had with each other and with the health education coordinator of the district as well as their need for novelty. In their written report, they also referred to the need to challenge the children's misconceptions on the subject of sex and help them adopt a positive attitude towards sexuality, an attitude that would be beneficial for these children in the future. They described their main goals as helping children to get to know their own bodies and the body of the "other"; to be informed about basic hygiene rules; to be able to understand the changes in their bodies and be prepared for forthcoming changes; to be able to address and communicate sensitive (taboo) issues and feelings of guilt regarding sexuality; to prepare themselves for healthy gender relationships by gradually becoming aware of their personal and societal rights and responsibilities. Finally, they refer to the need to educate children on issues of sexual harassment and abuse.

During the seven months that the program had lasted, both teachers reported that they used many more teaching hours (up to five) every week than the original one, because of the interest in the subject that pupils showed.

The program was based on material that either the pupils or invited speakers brought to school, material the teachers could obtain from various sources, and a few books and leaflets that the health education coordinator provided. Throughout the program, the teachers used different approaches and teaching methods, mainly experiential techniques such as free association; group discussions, free or controlled conversations, and role-play and drama activities. There were also group-work activities such as producing artefacts, preparing and conducting interviews, and participating in seminars run by experts.

Some of these seminars provided by local psychologists and other health experts were organized for the parents as well.

When the two teachers were asked to discuss the impact this program had on their pupils' well-being, a number of common issues were identified. More particularly, the teachers reported that this program gave them the opportunity to enhance existing knowledge levels, challenge misconceptions on sexuality issues, improve communication between pupils and their parents, challenge current behaviours and encourage their critical thinking, enable their pupils to develop negotiating and conversational skills, and influence their self perceptions positively.

5.4 Study IV: Sexuality discourses in school settings

Sexuality discourses in school settings are about people, and people are always sexual beings. The fourth study of this work explored the experiences of particular teachers, specifically situations in which pupils attempted to flirt them. In all the stories, teachers acknowledged various symbols of the sexuality discourse, such as love messages, affectionate drawings or attentive behaviours. This acknowledgement, however, took place within the private / confidential situation of an interview or a memory construction. In the school, that is in public, teachers choose not to address those discourses in a sexual framework. They both negated the sexual aspect and treated the whole experience humorously, or alternatively, they kept silent about the sexual aspect, while trying to redirect the course of desire from the teacher herself to the pedagogical outcome (learning) through their behaviour and their remarks. Flirting was interpreted as a natural process in the biological development of their pupils, or was justified by placing the whole experience in a parental framework.

A personal memory formed part of the research data in the fourth study. This inclusion was justified on the grounds of better understanding personal

motives for undertaking research, as well as to make the point that the researcher is not merely a medium, a detached instrument of research production, but a determining factor of the research process.

5.5 A synthesis of findings

One of the main challenges in the sequential explanatory research work has been the fact that although the data collection covered the same problematic phenomenon, in this case the provision of sex education, the time of collection differed, which affected the data analysis and discussion. In other words, data were analysed and discussed separately and sometimes in a rather fragmented manner throughout the the four studies. The following part provides a brief synthesis of the data (figure 8).

One of the important findings of this work was the recognition of research as an embodied experience and practice. The researcher is an individual whose personal experiences affect the research endeavour in multiple ways. In this case, it has become very clear that my earlier personal and professional experiences shaped the direction of the research process and informed decisions on the research subject. Since it is not possible for the researcher to function in a detached or value-free manner, it is important, as I argue here, that the subjective processes of the research become an issue of systematic reflection and analysis on the researcher's part.

Suggestions of the important role of the teachers in the application of sex education were made throughout this work. Since teachers' classroom experiences point to school settings as sexualized environments, the findings of this work contribute to the argument for critical awareness of such contextual factors and conditions. Teachers' practices as well as perceptions at a personal and professional level are defined by such experiences to some extent.

Sex education as an educational activity occupies a marginal place within the instructional practices of teachers in Greece. The findings of these studies indicate that, along with the official curriculum of health education that introduces sex education as an option for health education program development, there is a hidden curriculum supported by visual representations in textbooks and other contents that render sexuality and sexual relationships issues as invisible throughout the primary school.

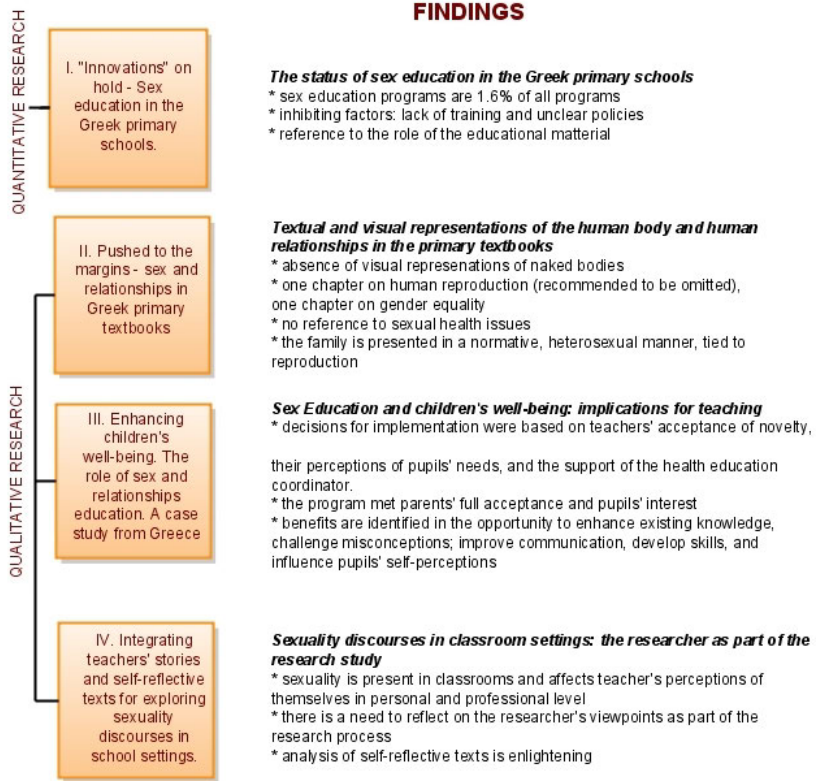


Figure 8. Research findings

The findings of these studies showed that such invisibility discourages teachers from opting for sex education program implementation. The marginalization of sexuality and gender relationships as an educational subject makes sex education marginal in practice as well, in the sense that teachers rarely implement such programs. As the findings indicated, they prefer less contentious subjects that have clearly defined pedagogical aims and approaches. However, as other findings of this work showed, when they engage in the provision of sex education programs, this can become a rewarding and important experience for teachers as well as pupils (and their families). Sex education has the potential to strengthen classroom relationships along with a positive effect on individual knowledge, perceptions and skills. Making such experiences more visible and putting them in the forefront of the discussion

of sex education applications is seen as an important contribution of research to praxis.

In summary, this work aimed at raising awareness of factors that frame sex education in the margins of pedagogical practice in the Greek primary schools at the moment. Within the framework of critical research that engages in deconstructing phenomena perceived as problematic, by questioning theoretical and practical instances of the research process, the following chapter is a critical discussion of the findings of the studies. The overall aim is to proceed in an alternative reconstruction of the problematic account and consequently discuss the potential for change (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998).

The following chapter offers an alternative reading of the findings of the four studies, influenced by the main concepts of critical research, namely, enlightenment and emancipation. The discussion is centred around the three research data sources of this work—the policy documents, the teachers, and the researcher.

6 Discussion

Critical social research begins from the life problems of definite and particular social agents who may be individuals, groups, or classes that are oppressed by and alienated from social processes they maintain or create but do not control. Beginning from the practical problems of everyday existence it returns to that life with the aim of enlightening its subjects about unrecognized social constraints and possible courses of action by which they may liberate themselves. Its aim is enlightened self-knowledge and effective political action. Its method is dialogue, and its effect is to heighten its subjects' self-awareness of their collective potential as the active agents of history (Comstock, 1982, p. 382)

Sex education as a thematic topic of health education programs is ignored by the majority of Greek teachers (Study I). Issues of sexuality, the human body and human romantic relationship are also marginalised or even suppressed subjects within the Greek educational system (Study II). In practical everyday terms however, the lack of any educational intervention on the subject might be translated into a range of alarming negative sexual health indicators in the population in general and the young population in particular. At the same time, as I have argued in parts of this work, school-based sex education might have a beneficial outcome (see Study III).

Nevertheless, in order for sex education to become a plausible alternative in teachers' health education practices it is important to reflect on teachers' needs and attitudes (Study IV). Here, in discussing the research outcomes of the overall research project, I focus on the three educational sources that informed the research generally: the policy documents, the teachers, and the researcher.

6.1 The educational policies: The marginal position of sex education

Public education is a good provided by the state. As such, it is also controlled and directed by central governmental policies which, as I am about to argue here, can occasionally be contentious. The makers of educational policies in Greece recognise sex education in terms of health education and subscribe to the importance of the school in the provision of sex education. According to a publication of the Greek Ministry of Education:

Sex education is a subject of the modern school, part of health education thematic units. Although tradition regards parents as directly responsible for the sex education of their children, the reality is different. Many parents find it difficult to discuss sexual issues with their children or regard sexuality as a taboo issue. As a result, children resort to information provided by friends, various publications, movies, etc., the quality of which is questioned. The school, by introducing sexuality education, has the ability to develop a pedagogical tool that can provide not only accurate information but also contribute to developing responsible attitudes and behaviours, (Merakou et al., 2000, p. 12).

As argued (Levesque, 2000), the control of the state over educational matters is manifested in both decisions on the professional requirements of educators as well as the content of the education provided. Approximately 1.6% of the health education programs implemented in Greece are about sex education. Seen from the viewpoint of the policy-makers of the Greek Ministry of Education, teachers are offered the opportunity to develop sex education programs as part of the health education cross-curriculum activities. Particularly, within the *National Curriculum* of education, references to sex education are made under the topics of “Getting to know myself / My body”, and “Developing relationships with others” as well as “The appearance of the secondary gender characteristics in the body” and the “Reproductive system” (Greek Government Gazette, 304, pp. 4346–4349).

The lines above describe the official curriculum for sex education in Greece. For Giroux (1988), however, schooling is much more complicated process than the official documentation such as the curricula postulate. One of the main reasons for the failure of educational reforms is the above recognition. The findings of this work argue for the existence of a kind of parallel curriculum that makes sex education issues invisible, thus affecting teaching practices directly. A schooling process that results in outcomes different than the official proclamations is seen as a *hidden curriculum* (Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 2002). Such a curriculum “deals with the tacit ways in which knowledge and behaviour gets constructed, outside the usual course materials and formally scheduled lessons” (McLaren, 2002, p. 212). What is learnt at school is to a significant extent shaped by the hidden curriculum. The task in critical educational research is thus to recognise how social norms and values are being transmitted through the schooling process and identify and challenge them (Giroux, 1988).

Educational material for sex education interventions as part of Health Education activities is scarce. Although the Ministry of Education has published one book and a CD-Rom, data from this work, as well as from a previous research project on teachers (Gerouki, 2008), indicate that most teachers

are not aware of it. One possible reason is that existing materials were developed for students from 11 (that is, the last two grades of primary school) to 14 years of age (the two first grades of high school). Although a set of the most recent educational material (figure 1) that had been developed both for primary school pupils and teachers (see Introduction), arrived at the offices of health education coordinators (beginning of the 2008–2009 school year), more copies have still not been distributed to the schools, neither is there an announcement of when this will happen.

Textbooks are treated as a source of legitimate knowledge. As such, their content and structure influence teachers in their choice of teaching practices and topic selection (Garner, 1992; Venezky, 1992; Kapsalis & Charalampous, 1995; Tani, 2004). By examining the curriculum and relating it to the content of the textbook, this work aimed to reveal the underpinning normative attitudes towards sexuality and relationships, and to relate these to teachers' attitudes to practice. Consequently, the findings of Study II draw attention to the fact that Greek primary textbooks present and deal with the human body and human relationships in the most asexual manner (Appendix B).²¹ This deliberate omission however, contrasts with a body of research this work included (see Study IV) that depicts school environments as sexualized places and school children as highly interested and actively involved in forming and negotiating romantic relationships (Halstead & Waite, 2001a, 2001b; Epstein et al., 2003; Renold, 2005). In addition, it ignores a line of argument for the provision of systematic sex education right from the primary school or even earlier (Kakavoulis, 1995; Gouvra et al., 2001; Gerouki, 2007a), as well as negating the few references to potential sex education topics presented in the health education curriculum, or directives of the Ministry of Education. Finally, this phenomenon has an important direct negative consequence in any efforts on the teachers' part to engage in sex education projects. Teacher choices on health education programs are influenced by the visibility of the subject in the textbooks (Study I).

The educational reform in Greece is influenced by political decisions based on directives that represent broader European Union ideologies as well as the need to achieve consensus and balance within local forces. Reforms are initiated by politicians and in many cases decisions are not made based on

²¹ Beside the findings that had been discussed in Study II, a brief examination of the newly developed sex and relationships primary books shows that in the teacher's version of both there is a section that provides more information about the physiology of the female and male reproductive organs. As we read there, "clitoris is an organ that in miniature resembles the male penis" (Askitis, 2008a, p. 76; Askitis, 2008b, p. 80). Moreover, mention of the clitoris as part of the female reproductive organs is completely absent from the pupil's version of the book (Askitis, 2008c, p. 20).

what is better for the population, but on what will not upset the current situation and create conflicts among their “political clientele” (Didaskalou, 2002). Greek political culture is described as “the overgrown, cumbersome, party-controlled, centralized, and authoritarian state-steering apparatuses of government, the continued clientelist political culture, and a weak civil society” (Kazamias & Roussakis, 2003, p. 11). The absence of sex education topics from the primary textbooks but relevant, though limited, reference in the *National Curriculum* is indicative of such “power games” and negotiations. “These negotiations are partly the result of different formations of “left” and “right”, of the relative power of the “moral majority” and a discourse of “sexual liberalism”, and the power of religion compared to that of civil/secular society” (Epstein et al., 2003, p. 4).

The full name²² of the Greek Ministry of Education is “Ministry of National Education and Religions”. The official position of the Orthodox Church²³ is against premarital relationships (Kornarakis, 1995). Additionally, the Church opposes western approaches to sex education (Faros, 1998). “In the absence of a discourse of equal opportunities, religion is playing an increasingly important role in educational debate over the nature of school sex education” (Thomson, 1993, p. 232). Regarding this work, the influence of the Orthodox Church to decisions about educational affairs, content and issues becomes very clear in examining the case of religion as a school subject (see Study II).

In this light, the marginal, almost invisible place sex and relationships issues occupy in the textbooks is seen as the aftermath of the conflict between religion and secular views on the organization of private life. “Opposing beliefs among the state, society and the church cause the greatest difficulties in educating young people about sexuality issues” (Kreatsas, 2003, p. 29).

The need to identify the dynamics and ideological assumptions that pertain the provision of sex education in the Greek primary school was thus central to this discussion. The content of curricula as well as textbooks and other educational material are decided upon particular educational policies. Such decisions, as the findings of this work showed, reflect an interplay between societal pressures, and power games between dominant ideologies. The school becomes a terrain for the contestation between conflicting ideologies. In the case of sex education in Greece, such ideologies might be identified as religious and secular approaches to human sexuality.

²² However the most recent name, due to a change of government on October of 2009, is “Ministry of Education, Lifelong Learning and Religions.”

²³ That represents approximately 96% of the population in Greece.

6.2 The educational praxis: The role of the teachers

Ignoring sex education is seen throughout this work as the Greek teachers' way of responding to the absence of a series of pragmatic requirements such as the visibility of the subject in the textbooks, teacher training issues and the like, the existence of which, as in other cases (for example, health education programs on nutrition), would facilitate implementation. An alternative reading of these findings, however, is to see teachers as maintaining a kind of resistance as a response to the conditions that direct sex education. "The dominant strategy of resistance has become that of silence" (Baudrillard 1975 in McLaren, 1995, p. 102). As Achinstein and Ogawa (2006) argue, teachers' refusal to comply with various educational reforms and policy directives is often interpreted in research documents as indicative of some psychological trait within the person that inhibits change. However, as these two researchers argue in their study, teacher resistance may also reflect their subscription to different approaches to educational matters. In that light, resistance is seen as a matter of principle "that arises from deep commitments rather than psychological deficits" (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2006, p. 52).

The concept of resistance from the critical pedagogical perspective is often used to explain failure in educational terms, being seen as a demonstration of human agency against oppressive conditions. Resistance is seen as a rejection of the dominant school culture and its methods (Giroux, 1988; Darter et al., 2008; McLaren, 2008; Weiler, 2008) and a way of attaining power (McLaren, 1995). The teachers' reading of the ideological messages underpinning the place of sex and relationships within the textbooks and other educational practices is demonstrated by rejecting the subject altogether. At least the authors of a teacher's book (some of them primary teachers themselves) have been very clear on this. The authoring team of the 6th grade human reproduction chapter, recognising their limited, fragmented approach, suggest that teachers should omit the chapter altogether. In their own words:

We believe this chapter should be part of a broader subject of sex education or health education. For these reasons and mainly because of the fragmented way that we had to presented this issue in two hours the authoring team suggests this chapter should be omitted. However, the authors of this book, against their own opinions, were obliged to include this chapter since they had to follow the curriculum (Apostolakis et al., 2006, p. 244).

However, as the work of Paul Willis (1981) demonstrates, sometimes resistance without the element of challenge works towards preserving those particular dominant and oppressive structures.

The first study of this work, in agreement with earlier research (Gerouki, 2007a), pointed to teacher training as the single most important factor that might enhance the implementation of sex education programs. Teaching about sex, sexuality, human relationships, and the like is a sensitive issue. This work revealed that it is difficult for teachers to discuss sex and relationships, most respondents characterizing the issue as “taboo.” Respondents referred to the potential feelings of embarrassment of teachers as inhibiting factors in dealing with sexuality matters. This could be related to the fact that the issue is considered taboo, as well as to the perceptions of inadequate preparation or training of Greek teachers which would be necessary for dealing with the subject. However, currently there is either no or extremely limited in-service teacher training in Greece to cover such issues. The Ministry of Education through the Health Education Offices nevertheless should be responsible for providing this.

The success or failure of a new idea or subject depends on the support the teachers receive from the relevant administrators and other colleagues. The informants of this research felt that the support of the central administration on the issue of sex education was inadequate. They believed that proper promotion of the subject from the Ministry would help to increase such programs. In recent years there has been talk about “decentralization” in Greece; however, administration, control, and policy-making remain centralized and bureaucratized (Didaskalou, 2002; Kazamias & Roussakis, 2003). In such an educational system, which is organized in a top-down, controlled, and centralized form, teachers are used to requiring specific guidelines, materials, and time frameworks within which to teach. Research in Greece indicates that “teachers’ attitudes are all-important in inclusive schools. If the legislation itself sends out contradictory messages, then teachers may well not take heed of the call for inclusion” (Didaskalou, 2002, p. 479). This seems to be the case regarding sex education practice. The Ministry of Education introduces the development of these projects as bottom-up health education activities. However, without providing additional support, adequate training, and well-designed materials, sex education remains unplanned, unprepared, and hidden on the outskirts of educational practice.

The idea of education as “half-education”, originally proposed by Theodor Adorno, has been used to describe how formal education results in estranging the student from the social and personal circumstances. The researcher’s role in this situation is to provide examples of education that chal-

lenge alienation constructions and promote progressive education (Kincheloe, 2007, p. 25).

Teachers are seen as important factors in the success of any educational intervention (Inbar, 1996; Buston et al., 2002; Cheung, 2002; Stevens, 2004; Bitan-Friedlander et al., 2004), sex education included (Bowden et al., 2003). Two different views were taken in examining the role of the teachers throughout this work. The first was to approach and examine teachers as potential or future sex educators (Study III). The second was the assumption (Study IV) that teachers, like any other human being, do not function in a vacuum “sexually speaking”, neither are they immune to sexual messages that they receive during their professional lives. By examining flirting situations as part of various sexuality discourses that take place in schools settings, the study set out to bring a widely neglected issue into the academic discussion. In that sense, directing academic attention to the experience of teachers on the matter might pave the way for undertaking more research on the subject.

Suppressing sexuality issues in school and silencing teachers were seen throughout the fourth study as contributing to an erroneous general feeling that schools had no space for the sexual, treating school members (teachers as well as pupils) as inherently asexual beings. In that sense, research on students’ feelings about their teachers could be interesting even though challenging. As mentioned, researching children’s sexuality is a rather neglected issue or has been focused mainly on child abuse (Sandfort & Rademakers, 2000).

Nevertheless, this work argues for the importance of research focusing on the experiences of teachers as well as students’. Trimble (2009, p. 61) urges considering “affect and embodiment as crucial and complementary components of sexual learning”. Moreover, she believes that the role of educators is, in addition to facilitating students, to explore and reflect on their emotions (Trimble, 2009, p. 61). This however, will not be possible before educators themselves become competent interpreters and critical judges of their own roles and underlying practices. Relative research data should therefore attempt to develop conditions and practices such as personal development sessions, training and the like which would provide teachers with the opportunity to explore, reflect on and discuss such experiences.

Teachers were also seen as potential sex educators; that is, as practitioners who are provided by the health education curriculum with the potential to develop and implement sex education programs, and use their pedagogical training to allocate or even produce resources and use them in order to teach

about such issues in their classes.²⁴ The aim of the third study (Study III) was then to present and discuss the development and implementation of a primary school sex education program. Given the limited proportion of sex education in health education programs, locating teachers who had been early adopters of sex education in the first place proved quite challenging. However, by inquiring among my colleagues I was able to contact two teachers in a city approximately 80 km away from where my own teaching place is. These two teachers, who had implemented a joint sex education program at some point, agreed to talk to me about their experience. They also provided me with some of the teaching material they had used, as well as their report and other artefacts, outcomes of that program (see Study III). Although the main focus of that study was the impact of sex education on the health and well-being of pupils, discussion among the teachers on the way they approached their subject attracted my attention equally.

One of the main factors that both teachers mentioned as an obstruction to the program's development had been the lack of educational material and particular directives. *"I was afraid of it because there is nothing. That is, there is no literature, no specific plan; there is nothing official to rely on."* As I have discussed in other parts of this work, this is not far from the truth. Moreover, in an educational environment where teachers are used to top-down approaches to teaching, as these had been discussed more extensively (see Study I, also Gerouki, 2007a), this kind of consideration from the teachers does not come as a surprise. However, as I am about to argue here, this perceived difficulty might have been the actual strength of the program.

Freire (1986) introduced the concept of *banking education* to describe an educational practice that perceives teachers as depositors of knowledge and students as receivers. Within this framework knowledge is treated as the possession of some educated elite. Knowledge is thus offered as a kind of gift to those who do not know. The centre of the educational practice is the teacher who knows / thinks / teaches, in other words acts, and at the receiving end there is the student, the passive recipient of the intervention. The teacher is the subject and the student the object of the educational encounter. In this process, as Freire argues, students' creative potential is seriously threatened; moreover, the predominant conditions are reproduced.

²⁴ I must emphasize, however that no primary teacher was included in the authoring team of the newly developed sex and relationships education programs for the primary school. The authoring team of Dr Askitis included two urologists, one gynaecologist, one child psychiatrist, two clinical psychiatrists, and four psychologists—one of whom a teacher of psychology. I consider such an absence as a deprivation. Knowledge, experience and viewpoints of primary teachers' should not be missing from such an important effort.

A precondition for the banking approach to teaching is recognition of the higher status of the teacher as the legitimate vector of knowledge. The moment the two teachers of the sex education project acknowledged their own limitations, *"I told the children that this is something new for me too. Something I am doing for the first time"* in the sense that they had not official material or directives on the content of the program, at that same moment they accepted their pupils as contributors to the educational process, thus as subjects instead of objects. An outcome was that both teachers, apart from their contribution to the course content, also trusted their pupils to bring along relevant material, *"they [pupils] found a lot of things alone."* The absence of clear directives encouraged them to give space to their pupils. As they both admitted they largely based their intervention on conversations initiated by their pupils. Pupils had been more than cooperative contributors, *"maybe they were interested, maybe they liked it more, they were asking"*. The pupils' interest consequently increased; along with their active participation: *"The whole time I had their [pupils] unwavering interest", "It was an one hour program and I ended up doing it even five hours in a week". "We forgot the lesson and we were discussing"*. This had also produced parental satisfaction *"In our [parents'] meetings often they mentioned how happy they were with their children's enthusiasm to search and learn what we discussed at school."*

Overall the teachers described an experience that might have occasionally been challenging' however it had also proved to be extremely rewarding (see Study III). In their conversations, they described moments of reluctance and uncertainty, *"At some points I got lost", "I am not a specialist", "I didn't know what to tell them"*, or even stress *"I was afraid how this conversation would be conveyed outside [the classroom]", "I didn't know how the rest of the school and the parents would react."* However, they both believed that it was, after all, a positive experience for themselves, their pupils, and for the pupils' families. *"I was both afraid and excited about the new experience", "Even now [after four years] I keep it as a precious memory of all the programs that I have done", "I told the kids about the program and they were clapping", "The outcome? Everybody was so satisfied!"*. *Even now [four years later] when I meet these pupils [who are upper secondary students] they talk to me about that program."*

We often read in the literature about students perceptions of the inadequacy of sex education programs. In general, students are critical of the content, the timing, and the frequency of such programs in many studies (Measor et al., 2000; Buston & Wight, 2002, 2006; Allen, 2005; Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Alldred & David, 2007; Selwyn & Powell, 2007; Constantine et al.,

2007; Allen, 2008). It has been found that school sex education programs are incompatible with young people's actual needs and experiences. Forming relationships and social circumstances for adolescents that influence sexual behaviour are neglected subjects. Moreover, heterosexuality and male-female intercourse are the mainstay of the overall discussion. Finally, options for developing communication and negotiation skills are limited (Abel & Fitzgerald, 2006; Hirst, 2008). In brief, "Young people tell us that their sex education is 'too little', 'too late', and 'too biological'" (Lenderyou, 1998, p. 316) and, as later studies show, "too heteronormative". Many programs that are designed following national curriculum guidelines have been found insufficient to meet the needs of students that belong to sexual minorities (Fine & McClelland, 2006). The needs of students from ethnic minorities, as well as female students are not always adequately met either (Fine & McClelland, 2006). Finally, there is research confronting the messages school sex education sends to male students (Hilton, 2007).

As Trimble (2009, p. 59) argues, "creating the spaces for youth to be able to explore issues of interconnectivity and intersubjectivity in sexual contexts helps to advance some of the intrinsically complex emotional projects we undertake by being human." The pupils who had participated in that program, at least according to their teachers, had been really happy and interested with what they were learning at school. I do not imply here that this program was more successful than others that might have been organized differently in terms of curriculum guidelines and materials used. There is no way to tell under the current circumstances. As one might argue, the novelty of the subject along with its challenging nature might also have been enough to provoke the interest of the pupils and create this fulfilling atmosphere that both teachers explicitly described in their interviews. Nevertheless, those pupils and their families could be important future research sources of information on the utility and effectiveness of sex education programs in Greece. One important line of inquiry, however, must be the effects that their involvement in the planning of the program had had on their perceptions of the program's success.

6.3 Reflexivity in the Research Process: The role of the researcher

Admitting a personal interest in the choice of research topic is not a novel claim in research studies (Herzog, 1998; Tani, 2001; Sikes, 2006). Similarly, this research project has been established on personal, subjective grounds. In

other words, my research work was influenced by my experiences as a primary school teacher and directed from a personal, but educated, conviction of the merits of comprehensive sex education teaching. The need to discuss those experiences and personal dispositions more explicitly in order to address research issues was, however, developed progressively. That is, the more I became involved with my data and my research participants, the more I understood the impact of the personal element on my research. However, by admitting a connection and interrelation without systematically reflecting on the interplay between those personal elements and value systems and how these inform the researcher along with her research project, is something like finishing the story halfway through. Therefore, I found it necessary to introduce the subjective element and include self-reflective texts and memory work as additional influential concepts informing the research design.

In critical research, awareness begins with reflecting on the subjective and intersubjective presuppositions of the researcher (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). In that manner, researchers thoroughly explore how their personal stories become part of the research project and use them to enrich it. "To make sense of what we observe or what people tell us, we may draw on the richness of our own experience, particularly if what we are studying we also have experienced" (Hertz, 1997, p. xiii).

This process, as I will argue here, is not straightforward nor does it develop as a mechanistic response to some theoretical conceptualization. It rather reflects a process of personal growth and is based on a need for intellectual understanding. The interplay between understanding the personal within the societal is manifested in two ways. It both informs the research process and outcome and questions the researcher's ontological and epistemological preconceptions. "The process of widening the research lens to include the researcher and her place in the research not only enlarges 'the fieldworker's' conceptual field, but recognizes it. It poses challenges to the fieldworker's most fundamental beliefs about truth and objectivity" (Karp & Kendall, 1982, in Heyl, 2001, p. 378).

In various articles (see, for example, Haug, 1987; Ellis & Flaherty, 1992; Ronai, 1995; Ellis et al., 1997; Ellis & Bochner, 2000), the researcher's own experiences and personal stories have been referred to and used as a backbone of the research analysis. Instead of reserving the place of the detached, "invisible and mute" observer; of the "outsider" whose responsibility is to visit "the field", collect her data and withdraw in order to write her report, researchers inspired by these approaches start by "focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience; then, they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). It is not without

reason however, that these stories refer to meaningful personal experiences. Discussing autobiographical elements about sexuality, child abuse, personal losses and other similar sensitive issues in the private sphere as part of the research content, or as the research subject per se, can be seen as a manifestation of the link between the researcher and the world. Additionally, this way reaffirms the personal contribution to the research subject matter. However, it can also assume a therapeutic course. Autobiographical writing is not a mere account of previous events, but a narrative reorganization of the past that sees into the future. "Reconstruction of the past goes along with anticipation of the likely life trajectory of the future" (Giddens, 1991, p. 72).

Among educators, the reconstruction of stories based on remembering and self-work enables a better personal understanding, which affects their pedagogical stance (Chambers, 1998; Shacklock & Smyth, 1998; Mitchell & Weber, 1999; Mitchell et al., 2005). McLaren (2002) in *Life in Schools* starts by introducing his teacher's diaries and analyses these writings from a critical pedagogical perspective. Reflexivity, as argued, can become a tool for the sex education teacher to increase her or his understanding of the complex connotations surrounding sexuality. A personal sexual biography and identity has an impact on teachers' roles and attitudes (Kehilly, 2002b; Gannon, 2004).

Accordingly, the researcher in this work used a personal narrative to reflect on sexuality discourses in the school settings (see Study IV). The aim was to challenge both the common assumptions of schools as asexual environments and a manifestation of the interconnection between the researcher and her research subject and subjects (read participants). The personal narrative, as I am about to argue here, was formed through a reflexive process and was then treated as a basis for reflection, becoming itself a self-reflection meta-text, a kind of meta-reflexive platform that informed the research discussion along with the contributions of the other participants.

Reflexivity: the making sense project

In terms of the self, *reflexivity* is defined as a mental, individual process for conceptualizing and interpreting aspects of reality in a personal manner. This should not be confused with reflection, though. Reflection as a process answers to the individual. For Mezirow (2000) critical reflection is seen as the way to transform personal frames of reference. Reflexivity however, as a process answers to the communal. Reflexivity is seen as a way to know the self (Tripp, 1998); more importantly, as reflecting on the self in a critical manner (Levinson, 1998) within a particular contextual frame (Adams, 2003).

Within the critical research context, reflexivity is also seen as instrumental for understanding the interplay between dominant ideologies and power concepts and their impact on the research project. In that sense, reflexivity is the recognition of the particular socio-cultural and historical context of the research process and of the researcher as a critical interrogator of this context (Shacklock & Smyth, 1998; Grace, 1998). Fine and Weis (1998) use reflexivity to challenge *otherness* and argue over the need to become reflexive of the way and the extent to which we textualize ourselves along with the others. Tripp (1998) argues that critical reflexivity in research directs the researcher to examine her own values and practices as an attempt to make a positive difference. In that sense reflexivity is seen as a methodological tool for exploring questions of representation and authenticity in research. "Reflexivity thus is often understood as involving an ongoing self-awareness during the research process which aids in making visible the practice and construction of knowledge within research in order to produce more accurate analyses of our research" (Pillow, 2003, p. 178).

Pillow (2003, pp. 181–187) identifies four current practices of reflexivity. These strategies, as the author argues, are interconnected and interrelated; however, the first one informs the others to an important extent. Consequently, *reflexivity as recognition of self* is seen as a strategy built on the understanding of the researcher as a subjective entity. The authors of such reflexive texts recognize and expose their subjective self and experience as part of the story they tell. This reflexive process is a demonstration of self-awareness but can also (as an unfortunate outcome) become an advertisement for higher quality data. A second strategy of reflexive research regards *reflexivity as recognition of the other*. Inherent to this type is the need to produce legitimate research.

Representations of our understanding of others are the key to validity claims, but it may also risk privileging some positions (namely the researchers' position) over others. The third reflexive way treats *reflexivity as truth*. The idea of the use of a reflexive method as a tool is deep-seated here. Truth is out there and one can grasp it through a reflexive mode. Finally, there is *reflexivity as transcendence*. That is, the researcher by being reflexive might be able eventually to overcome the subjective self and background and achieve a higher level of being. Pillow (2003, p. 192) perceives the strategies mentioned above as informed by modernistic approaches. Consequently, instead of offering a methodological tool that challenges hegemonic and mainstream attitudes, they themselves become instruments for reproducing the power norms that they were intended to defy. She advocates therefore, a *reflexivity of discomfort*, a reflexive approach that manifests the problematic in

reflective processes, that admits failure, obscurity and disruption, instead of genuineness and lucidity.

In discussing the reflexive process that informed the fourth publication of this doctoral work I wrote in the final paragraphs:

While discussing the research matter with my research participants I knew all along that their stories were interconnected, even complementary to my teaching experiences. However, it was at the moment when the personal experience took a textual form (the memory) that I was able to understand its full implication. Since a text is always constructed in a historical and social framework, it can become a field for reflection and analysis. By analysing my story along with the other teacher's stories, I was able to understand my personal motives better. By reflecting on my personal experience, I believe I was better equipped to understand my participants' stories. However, there are always three parts in the research endeavour: the researcher, the research participants, and the research readers. By presenting the researcher's voice, my voice, in the account, the readers can make sense of the perspective that I bring to the study. At the same time, they also understand that the researcher is not merely a medium, a detached instrument of research production, but a determinant factor in the research process. This is especially clear in qualitative research designs in which the involvement of all participants becomes more personal and often deals with more delicate issues. Constructing the memory text for this article was not an easy endeavour, albeit necessary. Research in which autobiographical details are exposed required masking your respondents and revealing yourself. This does not come without a degree of embarrassment however. The researcher's biography, along with the particular dynamic of the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, is in my opinion what justifies Sears' quote at the beginning of this section. A journey into the personal cannot be feasible unless we are open to the possibility of critical self-exploration and willing to expose such practices along with their outcome. Having to go through this process I became aware that memory-work 'is an act of liberation' (Haug, 1987, p. 35) as research should be. (Study IV)

At least two of the strategies that Pillow (2003) has described are apparent here, particularly reflexivity as recognition of the self. *By analyzing my story along with the other teacher's stories, I was able to understand my personal motives better*, as well as reflexivity as recognition of the other. *By reflecting on my personal experience, I believe I was better equipped to understand my participants' stories.* Following this interpretation, the story (see *The Dance*, Study IV) that was produced by the reflexive process enhanced self understanding and provided the potential to understand the research participants. The use of "I believe" implies that this is a subjective interpretation, however. Nevertheless, as I argue here, there is one more function of reflexivity that is also described in that paper. I will call it *reflexivity for liberation*; that

is, a reflexive process that results in a liberating self-awareness. *Having to go through this process I became aware that memory-work “is an act of liberation” (Haug, 1987, p. 35), as research should be.*

The issues I discussed in this work (flirting and sexual attraction) had been problematic issues for me as a teacher and consequently became more distinct issues of inquiry during the research process.

A number of entries in my reflection diary were about those situations when I felt that I was perceived not just as the ‘teacher’, but also as ‘a woman’, ‘a girlfriend’, a sexual human being. I wrote about those moments as instances of discomfort, anxiety, puzzlement, seduction, amusement, wonder (in that order). I wrote about the body, that of the teacher and that of the pupils, about ‘inappropriate’ attractions and what dealing with them felt like. In the interviews for my research project, some teachers voluntarily discussed similar issues. On other occasions I asked the question myself. (Study IV)

Along these lines, *reflexivity for liberation* is established on problematic issues (or those perceived as problematic by the researcher). However, this is not a reflexivity of discomfort in the sense discussed by Pillow (2003). Because this process does not stop in admitting the distress of a situation in the research condition, but moves one in an attempt to accept discomfort, one should relate it to the world outside the researcher; expose it; and then use it as a liberating tool.

Critical research seeks change. However, the individual changes through the collective and the collective through the individual. One of the critical understandings of this research process for this researcher had been that the process of researching and completing a doctoral dissertation can be a liberating, self-knowing and self-understanding process provided that one asks the questions and is open to investigate possible answers. As a matter of fact, such a research process is not merely about one’s set of data. Along the way, it is an investigation of the self.

The final chapter of this work based on the above discussion suggests possible courses of action for developing and implementing sex education programs in the Greek primary schools.

7 Concluding remarks: Implications for practice

In order for pupils to become competent sexual citizens that is, adequately educated on sexuality related issues and able to arrive at appropriate decisions for themselves and their social environment—they need knowledgeable educators and responsible policy-makers. Sex education in the Greek educational context is a range of lessons “learnt by omission”, and, as has been argued in this work, a marginalised subject. Its place in the hidden curriculum of the school practices is strongly linked to the limited visibility of the subject within the official curricula and the school textbooks. This invisibility, encouraged by particular educational policy decisions, nevertheless affects teachers’ choices for program development. Based on the studies of this postgraduate project, a number of suggestions can be made to secure a more central place for sex education teaching in the Greek schools (figure 9).

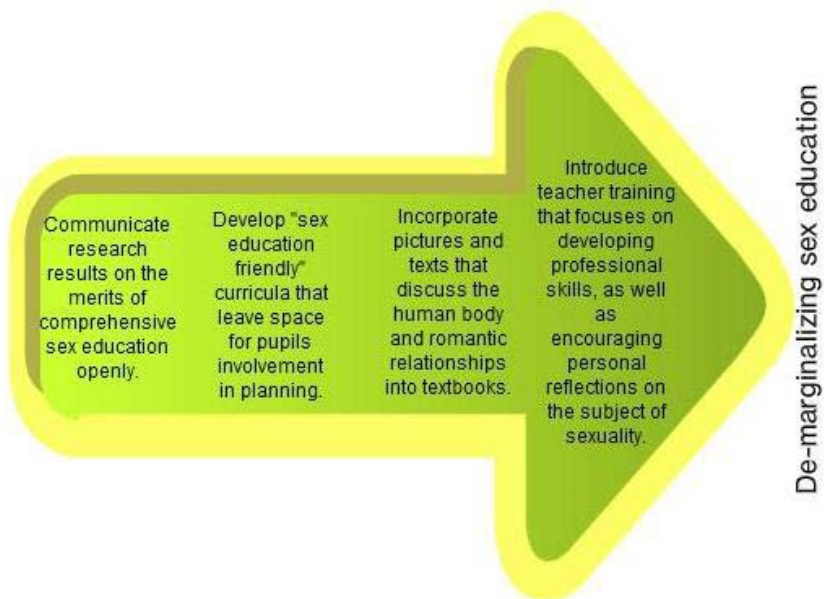


Figure 9. De-marginalizing sex education

It has been found that teachers ignore sex education programs. This omission has been interpreted here as an act of resistance on the teachers’ part towards

educational policies that ask them to select programs that are considered contentious, dangerous and taboo, without securing public support and consent, discuss the framework within which these interventions can be developed, or suggest relevant educational material.

One way to overcome this situation, as was suggested, is to reconsider the content of the primary textbooks and include texts and pictures that deal with the subjects of human body and human sexuality in forthcoming editions. Textual material that emphasizes romantic relationships and the emotional rewards of such relationships is also necessary to challenge current normative trends that dictate the notion that procreation is the main reason for marriage and family life. De-marginalizing the subject of sexuality and making sex education issues apparent in the textbooks, as well as promoting the need for systematic comprehensive school-based sex education, are among the measures to be taken for successful diffusion of sex education programs and consequently for increasing its selectivity among teachers. In sum, teachers need more solid grounds on which to stand in terms of material and stronger back-up in terms of training for teaching sex education.

Sex education, as argued in this work, can be beneficial for the health and well-being of pupils. It can also have a positive effect in their relationships with their parents and teachers. However, a critical observation that this work also made was the degree of involvement of pupils in designing their sex education programs. As this line of thought implies, the development of extremely structured course materials and the provision of specific textbooks on sex education might affect interest and involvement negatively although it will undeniably relieve the overloaded preparation schedules of teachers'. It might additionally alienate the subject matter from pupils' real needs and desires, especially if the development of such material is not based on needs assessment and other concrete research on particular educational and societal conditions. Making sex education another course in the curriculum might not be the solution to the problem. However, making the curriculum and current textbooks more "sex education friendly", teachers better informed and trained; and pupils and their families more involved might be.

Teachers are recognised as important elements in the success of any educational intervention. This teacher argued through her research work that sex education without taking teachers' experiences into consideration might be at least disinterested and potentially misleading. Schools are settings where people's sexuality is at play. Teaching is about exploring, sharing and learning for all involved. It will never, however, be an authentic experience if it is partly founded on silence, and distorted or untold stories.

Teachers, as has been argued in this work, should be encouraged to become more reflexive towards their practices and their dispositions. This researcher, as a reflective practitioner, argued for a kind of reflexivity for liberation. That however, implies reckoning teachers not only as mere practitioners that execute curriculum guidelines and other official directives, but as intellectual agents. In that sense, it is important to see teachers as being able to establish theoretically informed practices that produce practical positive outcomes.

An important line for research work in the future might consequently focus on developing appropriate pre- and in-service teacher training sessions based on the above theorizations. Investigating how issues about sexuality and school-based sex education could become more visible and part of a public discourse in Greece is also important. Such a discourse however, should not abandon the political for the sexual because, as this work argues, in essence, what is sexual is also political and the political, as long it is built on human agency, can never be detached from the sexual.

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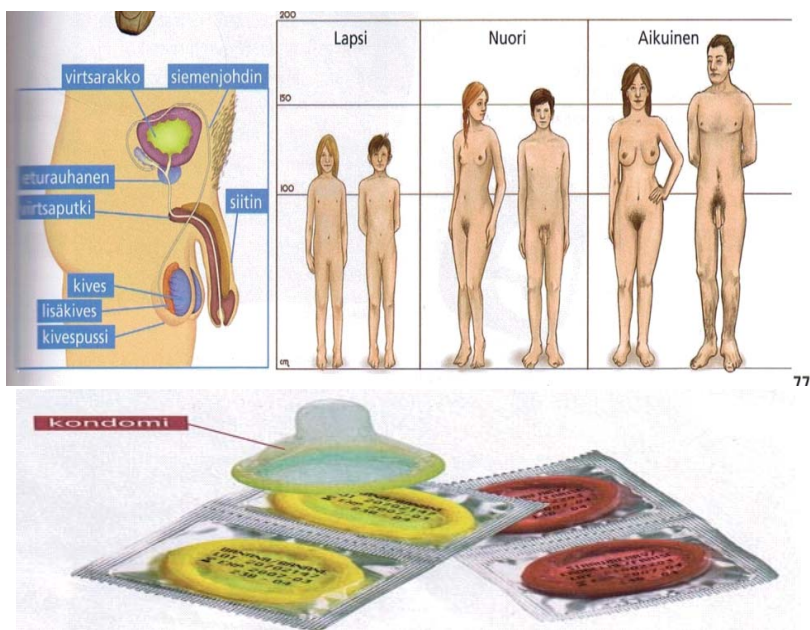
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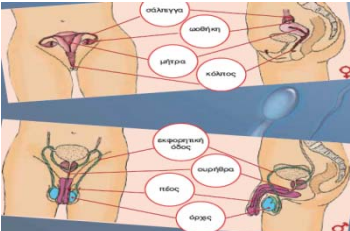
Appendices

Appendix A. Teaching about sexual organs and human reproduction in Finland (Biology and Environmental Studies, Grade 5)



Lindgren, A., Martinen, S., Sukselainen, A., Paso, S., & Pudas, A. (2007). *Jäljillä 5, Biologia, Maantieto*, (pp.77–81), Jyväskylä: Tammi

Appendix B. Human body representations in the Greek primary textbooks (Study II, p.335)

| grade | <i>Environmental studies / Science content and visual representation</i> |
|-------|---|
| 1 | <p data-bbox="272 336 572 363"><i>Body awareness (p. 80–84)</i></p>  |
| 4 | <p data-bbox="272 580 908 639"><i>Body awareness and care (student book p. 106, workbook p. 40)</i></p>  |
| 6 | <p data-bbox="272 825 801 852"><i>Human reproductive system (student book 126)</i></p>  |

Appendix C. The general themes and indicative questions of the semi-structured interviews

Personal definitions of children's sexuality

1. How do you understand my phrase 'pupils' sexually related behaviours or questions, or both'?
2. Can you provide stories to illustrate your understanding

Knowledge about the human body and human reproduction?

1. Do pupils discuss / ask about their body and their genitals?
2. What kinds of question do pupils ask?
3. Are they familiar with terms such as menstruation and so on?
4. Is there a gender difference in pupils' knowledge?

Sexual harassment / bothering

1. Do you remember situations in which pupils bothered other pupils or staff in a sexual manner?

Romantic relationships

1. Do you believe that pupils occasionally have romantic feelings for other pupils or staff?
2. How are such feelings being expressed within the school / classroom context?

Sexual and gender minority issues

1. Do you remember occasions when a pupil showed non-stereotypical, non-conforming behaviour, or interest in others?
2. Were these pupils (who exhibited a non-stereotypical gender behaviour) subjects of harassment, or bothering from their peers at school?
3. What was your reaction?

The role of the media

1. Are pupils familiar with pornographic material? (Gender differences)
2. What is the influence of TV in shaping pupils' perceptions about human sexuality and gender relationships?
3. Can you illustrate your opinion with examples from your practice?