

# “I Feel Like a Sex Ed Wizard Now”: Critical Community Psychology Applied in Digital Education for Teachers on the Topic of Sex Education

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## Abstract

*The discourse around sex education is ambivalent and normatively loaded, stretching roughly between conservatism, liberalism, and neo-emancipation. In Germany, teachers receive no specific training and have little access to education, besides short and optional training from third-party providers. As a result, they feel left alone, overburdened, and politically at risk while simultaneously reporting a personal desire to make a positive change. Teach Love is a psychological knowledge transfer project applying critical community psychology to teachers' continuing education on sex education. The participants receive emotion-, value-based, and pluralistic digital training based on empirically assessed needs and in collaboration with scientists (psychology, pedagogy, sociology) and practitioners (therapists, teachers, midwives) focusing on comprehensive competence. In this contribution, I present the empirically assessed teacher's needs on sex education and the resultant didactic. Second, I present the empirical post-measure evaluations to discuss the potential of applied critical community psychology in teachers' professionalisation. This contribution serves in three ways. Firstly, the paper presents a practically tested approach to how to deal constructively with polarizing topics in pedagogy. Secondly, the results show how to support teachers by applying critical community psychology in the teacher's professional development. Finally, insights into digital education formats, their applicability, effectiveness, and acceptability are gained.*

Keywords: sex education, applied community psychology, professionalisation, teacher education, digital education, continuous education

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## Sex education: A normatively loaded topic

The discourse around sex education<sup>1</sup> is ambivalent, polarized, interest-driven, and at times heated (Lemke, 2022; Siemoneit, 2022, Stein, 2023). The political stances stretch roughly from conservatism, including the urge to relocate sex education back into the domestic unit of families, to a liberal stance locating moderate sex education into schools to (neo)emancipatory stances, where sex education is constituted as a lifelong process, sex- and body-positive, diversity inclusive and shall emphasize sexual liberalization (Ahrbeck et al., 2022; Rothmüller & Scheibelhofer, 2016, Valtl, 2014)<sup>2,3</sup>.

From the conservative and liberal perspective, it is critically discussed whether and how contemporary sex education can have sexualizing and harmful effects, overburdening the youth. From the emancipatory perspective, the hope is that progressive sex education can lead to healthy, informed behavior and overall competent youth, with young people having access to all kinds of information in any case but shall gain from pedagogical framing and guidance. However, the currently predominating (neo-)emancipatory paradigm is also criticized from progressive stances (often psychotherapeutic/ psychoanalytical) for its lack of conceptualizing subjectivity, the missing perspective on corporeality, and its predetermined norms of sexuality. While being the opposite of repressed sexuality, it equally pushes for a normatively ‘good’ and desirable sexuality, today defined by exotic and fetishizing practices, and diversity. As such, it focuses on explicit techniques and skills instead of meaning, neglecting the inherent implicit, ambivalent, and mystical of sexuality (Degen, in press; Kammholz, in press, 2023; Hartmann, 2023; Zengler, 2023).

Research can deliver empirical answers to some of these concerns. As such, it is empirically shown how diversity-positive sex education seems to not have any homosexualizing effects and that it promotes more secure and safe behavior when compared to abstinence doctrines which have the opposite effects (Bourke et al., 2014; Rothmüller & Scheibelhofer, 2016). Furthermore, sex education beyond prevention and biology comes with multiple positive effects, such as abuse prevention and increased sexual and psychological well-being (Goldfarb & Liebermann, 2021; Fernandes & Junnagar, 2019; Schmidt et al., 2023). Diversity-positive sex education again leads to lower risk behavior in LGB+ communities (Evans et al., 2020; Epps & Markowski, 2021) and has positive effects on practiced consent (Richmond & Peterson, 2020). The effects of currently growing neo-emancipatory sex education remain to be scientifically investigated and related didactics developed (Degen, in press).

### Sex education: Status quo in Germany

In 1968, the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs established that sex education shall be institutionalized in schools as interdisciplinary and comprehensive (KMK, 1968). Furthermore, sex-positive and holistic sex education is

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<sup>1</sup> Here I focus Euro-Western discourses as that is where the data stems from, however, beyond the Euro-Western world the discourses are not less polarizing and heated, but surely differently balanced.

<sup>2</sup> An overview of the currently predominant sex-pedagogical paradigms in Germany are elaborated here: e.g. Ahrbeck (2022), Böhm (2022), Sielert (2015), Schmidt & Sielert (2013), Voß (2022).

<sup>3</sup> Obviously, there is a continuum, including countless stances between these abstract and superordinated positions.

internationally listed beyond the 2030 sustainability goals (Lameiras-Fernández et al., 2021). In line with this, research shows that parents and pupils seek information and advice from teachers, with schools playing a crucial role in sex education as supposed experts on sexuality (Holz, 2022; Urban et al., 2022).

Besides such empirical insight and policies, everyday life in schools remains challenging. Sex education in schools is perceived as awkward, with a ruling silence, and occurring defense strategies (e.g. provocation, withdrawal, laughter, bullying) (Blumenthal, 2014). Teachers in Germany are largely left alone with such challenges as they have largely no access to education or continuous education for professionalisation (Böhm, 2022; Drinck & Voß, 2020, 2022; Urban et al., 2022). As such, only 21 % of teachers can recall *any* education regarding the topic of sexuality, and only 9 % came in contact with the topic of prevention of sexual violence (Wienholz, 2022). Generally, sex education as part of student teachers' studies remains under the domain of either the coincidental university lecturer's personal interest and expertise or third-party providers stepping in (Holz, 2022). This is despite fully developed and accessible university curricula (Lache & Khamis, 2022)<sup>4</sup>.

Moreover, qualitative data shows, that even those teachers who assess themselves as being educated in the field, have knowledge gaps and lack competence regarding contemporary topics such as porn consumption, the physical realm of the body and self, social media, online dating, LGBTQIA+ (Degen, 2023), sexting (Dekker et al., 2021) and pressing topics such as interculturalism (Bittner & Meisert, 2021). Teachers themselves often describe their own sex education as *disastrous* or nonexistent, having little experience in reflecting on their own experiences and stance, and describe a resulting discomfort when talking and being asked about sex in school (Kubitza, 2022). Some even experience the school itself as a place of misused hierarchies and sexual harassment (ibid.) and in any case, teachers bring in their own history of sex and relationships, sexual identity, and orientation.

As a result, many relevant topics of sex education are avoided and sex education in practice is largely reduced to biology, disease- (STI), and unwanted pregnancy prevention (Goldfarb & Liebermann, 2021; Drinck & Voß, 2022). However, teachers explicitly communicate motivation and a desire to make a change for the better, while feeling held back by the lack of education, lack of adequate material, and the social and political environment, perceived as threatening (Degen, 2023; in press).

Third-party providers indeed offer training for teachers. These usually take a sexual pedagogy stance. While such options are perceived as positive and gainful and most certainly are legit, they usually come in a workshop format, addressing singularized topics, such as harassment, sexting, or sexual abuse prevention (e.g. Die Petze, 2022). Most of the training takes place in a workshop format of 2 to 5 hours, usually in digital or analog presence and at fixed times. Besides these workshop formats, the author is not aware of any interdisciplinary comprehensive training being offered for teachers besides the qualification for additional professions, such as therapeutic training and degrees at universities, which take several years, are expensive, often require specific qualifications, and come at a private cost.

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<sup>4</sup> Additionally, people with disabilities are structurally not adequately considered in sex education either, and marginalization increases quasi-proportionally to the extent of the need for support (Westphal, 2023, in press). This marginalization also applies in the context of schools, also schools including people with disabilities.

Pupils usually show great interest in sexual education and bring knowledge stemming from (social) media and peers. At the same time, they are not always able to deal with the content consumed, the social context, and their self competently and thus feel overwhelmed (Harder & Harder, 2022). Often, their needs and questions concern exactly the normatively loaded and ambivalent topics that are the least familiar to the teachers and easily get problematized (e.g. regarding pornography: Döring, 2011; Oeming, 2018).

In conclusion, the conditions of today's sex education in the German context are characterized by ambivalent, polarizing, and normatively loaded discourses with teachers being motivated, however, lacking education and profound competence, material, and social backup. At the same time, pupils seek knowledge far beyond functions and biology to competently navigate in digitalized, changing, and at times challenging contexts. The gap between the teacher's education and the youth's needs leads to unfortunate situations in schools where sex education is affected by helplessness, avoidance strategies, and miscommunication. The often resulting reductionist sex education, focusing on biology and disease prevention, again is evaluated as inadequate and outdated (Astle et al., 2020<sup>5</sup>). Thus, educating teachers in sex education can play a significant role, with potential positive effects not only for teachers and pupils but also for institutions and communities (Pierpaoli Parker, 2020).

### **Research question and study objective**

The above-described conditions kick off the project Teach Love, with the aim to implement a comprehensive, psychologically profound continuous education for teachers and student teachers, asking: How can continuous education on the topic of sex education be procured to a) enable teachers to implement successful, evidence-based and optimistic sex education in schools and b) increase the teacher's professionalism, competence and resilience in politically polarizing social settings?

For that goal, the knowledge transfer project developed a didactic operationalizing critical community psychology in digital professional development for teachers and student teachers, to then implement such courses, and evaluate the effects post-measure. The empirical part of the paper introduces the assessed needs, the resulting didactic and operationalization of the critical stance followed by the evaluation focusing on the effects on the self, changes in practice, and finally the effectiveness and applicability of digital education formats.

## **Critical community psychology applied in teacher's education**

The knowledge transfer project Teach Love is located in a critical psychology paradigm and applies the principles of critical community psychology as action research in practice (Levine et al., 2005). These principles are considered in all project stages, which will be displayed chronologically—intertwining the theoretical approach and the empirical application—below.

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<sup>5</sup> These data are from the US, however, similar needs are displayed in the German context.

**Research project: Teach Love*****Method***

The project was initiated bottom-up, with student teachers approaching the author's Department of Psychology seeking advice and support regarding sex education and reporting about challenges in practice and difficult situations in schools. As a resulting first step, we implemented a participatory research project, where we worked together with the student teachers, to understand the first-hand needs of practitioners, the social setting and resulting roles, and institutionalized conditions (Mann, 1978; Levine et al., 2005). Data were collected through interviews with student teachers ( $n = 52$ ), teachers ( $n = 59$ ), group discussions with teachers in training ( $n = 3$ ), and participatory observations in schools ( $n = 5$ ). Through that, insights were gained into their perspectives and settings and got in touch with the community. Furthermore, educational material and anonymous questions from 2355 pupils were collected and analyzed.

All interviews (applies also to the evaluation) were conducted as expert interviews, following Gläser and Laudel (2013) where the grounding principle is to develop a non-hierarchical conversation following a natural communicative flow. The aim is to gain new insights through an explorative design, with the participants being the experts in their everyday lives. The interviewer prepares a guide, including the research interests and possible questions, formulated as openly as possible. However, during the interview, such questions are situationally operationalized and reorganized alongside the developing logic of the interview.

***Analysis***

For the analysis, content analysis following Mayring (2012) was applied, conducted together with the students from our seminars and as a team of seven, including four students in their master thesis and three researchers from the department. Importantly, the content analytical method aims for reconstructive and integrative insights (see Figure 1).

Content analysis allows for both deductive coding taking theoretical hypotheses as a starting point, and inductive coding, where new knowledge is accessed strictly stemming from the data. The research team focussed on inductive coding, from an explorative stance. For the concrete procedure, students worked initially with the data analysis, collecting topics and paraphrasing the data, to then formulate more abstract definitions of the preliminary categories. We then confronted the topics occurring as a team, working with the comprehensive data set to define more abstract and unequivocal categories including interrelations, building main- and subcategories aiming for an integrative categorial system. The resulting integrative coding agenda was used to code the data.

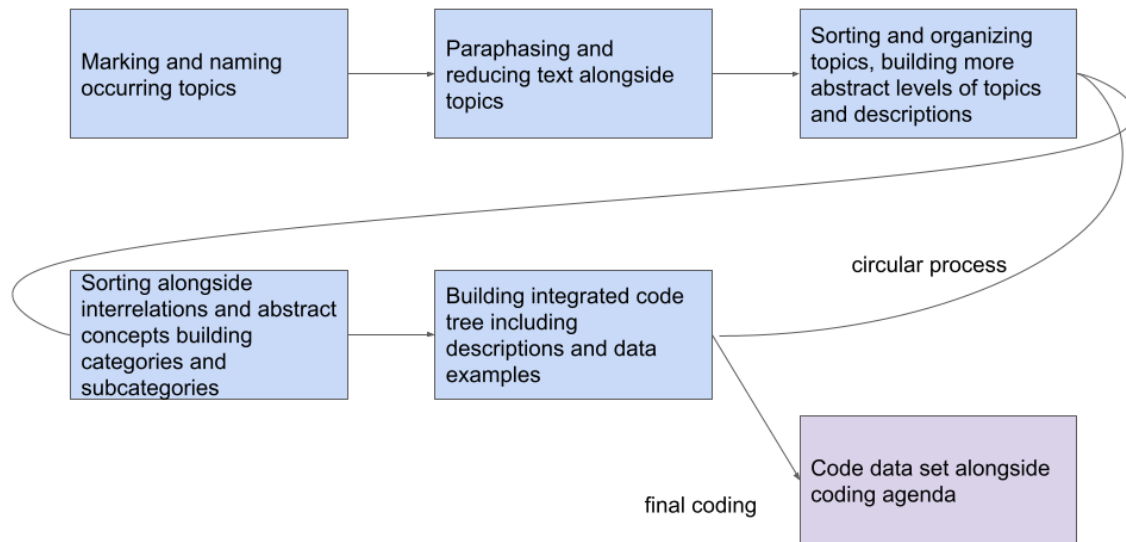


Figure 1: Analytical Procedure

### Findings: Teacher's perspective on sex education practice

Through the data analysis, we gained insights into five main categories pertinent to teachers' experiences of sex education: (1) *structural challenges*, (2) the *situation of the teachers*; (3) teachers' *social surroundings*; (4) teachers' *resulting strategies*; and finally (5) their *personal needs and visions*. The categories are depicted below with data examples.

As a biology teacher, I had some seminars on reproduction back when I studied (...) However, there was no access to any sort of education on all the important stuff, on pornography or violence. (...) When I started, I lacked all the preparation necessary and my current knowledge stems from my undertaking— still insufficient. The pressure I feel is when being confronted with homophobia. That topic is truly urgent and no one actually knows how to handle it. There is zero form of education accessible, only workshops on social media usage. Well, that's not the problem. (female, 27, high school teacher)

We had no education in sex ed at my uni, and within the first week as an intern at school, I was forced to teach sex ed, imagine how that went! The first question asked, was if I ever had a threesome. (male, 41, high school teacher)

I attended some workshops, and it was not a good experience, very specific people, who I experienced as unpleasantly dogmatic, it was not a great fit, and I did not finish the course. It was also far-fetched from our reality in schools. (male, 31, high school teacher)

Congruent to the current state of research, teachers reported a lack of education and access to continuing education that they perceived as applicable, useful, appropriate, and non-biased. The interviews confirm how, even those teachers who have received training in sex education, still reported a lack of knowledge and confidence in regard to urgent topics, values, and political aspects of sex education. The teachers named the following topics as

particularly pressing: interculturalism, pornography, safety and prevention (often related to digital contexts), promiscuity perceived as endangering and unhealthy (e.g. pupils having gang bangs at a young age), violence and group pressure, diversity, and relationship competence such as setting healthy boundaries, and media content.

I mean, everyone knows, these topics [LGBTQIA+] are heated, and I cannot decide what's right or wrong. I am somehow caught in the middle and everyone attacks me. I refuse to teach this stuff. As a male, I can only do it wrong. AND [loudly], we can hardly discuss these challenges, no one speaks about it beyond colleagues or our dean. (male, 33, high school teacher)

Everyone blames us teachers, starting with the media and continued by parents and even between colleagues as if bashing teachers would lead anywhere. It's not like we don't want to do our job, it's just more difficult than it looks. (...) I have an opinion for sure, I am just unsure, whether it is acceptable to act by it, it's all very dishonest really. (female 42, primary school teacher)

In addition to the current state of research, teachers reported how they feel overburdened and left alone by the system in a polarizing field with the perception of being politically at risk, responsible, and criticized for outcomes out of their control and as a result experiencing alienation. The data shows, how teachers urged for empirically sound methods, and the desire to do a good job, while juggling their own experiences, political stances, and ambivalent experienced social environment. At the same time, they had to navigate heated positions from both the parents, pupils, and institutions. Furthermore, they reported having limited access to timely material and little to no social backup, with both topics and related challenges being taboo among colleagues and administration.

I forbid personal questions. I know this is not optimal, it is actually quite awkward, and I feel bad for the pupils. (male, 41, high school teacher)

They don't trust me, I mean, what can I say, I am not a media person, and overall, it's a different world, how would they trust me to know anything relevant about their life? (...) I try, but it's not going great, and I don't blame them. (female, 39, high school teacher)

I observe myself, sanctioning pupils for their questions. Often, I just don't have a good answer, and I also feel offended and embarrassed. At the same time, I can not talk about it, because supposedly, we are all super comfortable and liberated, just that we are not. (female, 31, high school teacher)

The data shows how the teacher's gender and age can be perceived as problematic, pointing toward political challenges, societal pressure, and a lack of competence. It also appears that the experienced taboo is not sex education and topics on sexuality as such, but instead the possible lack of competence and familiarity with it. This results in negative dynamics through the teacher's strategies in coping with situations, including sanctioning students and avoiding situations and topics. This results in discomfort and concern on the teacher's side, who reveal regret about the established practice.

I have had some knowledge from TikTok channels (...) now I know all the pronouns, but honestly, I gained zero competence. (female, 31, high school teacher)

I enjoy following some [Instagram] accounts on sex education. However, while it supposedly should help me to understand my pupil's perspectives, it does not really help in the pedagogical practice. I am also annoyed by the misleading or even wrongful content of the supposed experts. (female, 29, primary school teacher)

As a strategy to compensate for the lack of education, teachers acquired knowledge through social media. While we so far know little about social media knowledge transfer, its effectiveness, and the quality of knowledge transfer (Döring, 2022), factual knowledge seems to be successfully communicated. The acquired knowledge includes the topics of transsexuality, homosexuality, sexual orientation and identification, pronouns, and sexual techniques. Such knowledge, however, often remains specific, singular, and biased, focused on techniques or facts, and is insufficient for the pedagogical practice not leading to a profound competence. Teachers explain how comprehensive competence, understanding of larger contexts, meaning, ambivalent perspectives, and background knowledge, which could lead to a responsible stance and reasonable discourse, beyond personal opinion, is hardly communicated on social media.<sup>6</sup>

I was ashamed of my vulva for many years as it did not look similar to the biology book, and I actually had ten years of bad sex in the male gaze until I discovered an emotional and positive way to own my sexuality. I really want to prevent these things from happening to young girls, history must not repeat itself (laughs). (female, 38, high school teacher)

Finally, the teachers' perspectives confirmed how sex education plays a double role, being important for them personally, and demonstrating how personal and professional roles are interrelated when teaching sex education.

## **The resulting didactic: Applying first-hand needs in practice**

Based on the empirical insights and critical community psychology principles (Levine et al., 2005), this project defined the following goals: a) close the existing knowledge gaps in the current professional development of teachers and build holistic competence while seeing teachers as already capable and motivated (strength-based perspective); b) implement an accessible, inviting, and inclusive pedagogical format; c) find a solution for handling polarized stances in pedagogical practice without marginalizing groups; d) build a community for social back-up; to overall e) urge for a confident self and increased agency in teachers who are able to improve the own situation in the future and make a sustainable change for the pupils, parents, institution and the communities (Levine et al., 2005; Kagan et al., 2020; Trickett, 2009).

Following the principle of learning by action and action by learning (Levine et al., 2005), the team put together a digital education program (which is continuous running), covering all topics based on the assessed needs and developed by experts from different fields (psychology, sociology, pedagogy, therapy, midwives), who moreover brought different

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<sup>6</sup> To what extent this is due to the channels, search direction, algorithm, the short formats per se, or the consumers cannot be decided here.



paradigmatic stances demonstrating that pluralistic collaboration is possible beyond crossing paradigms.

The resulting Teach Love didactic contains a four-step approach including a) emotion- and value-based, pluralistic, and evidence-based input alongside the current state of research, b) reflexive and introspective work on the self, c) knowledge transfer for the implementation in schools alongside cases and practical tasks, and d) evaluation. This didactic is elaborated below, alongside the projects' distribution, digital architecture, format, content, and paradigm.

### **Accessibility**

The digital format makes the program accessible regardless of geographical location and individual context. For institutional accessibility, the project aims for accreditation and funding from institutions and states. As such, the pilot was first run and funded by the state of Schleswig-Holstein in 2021 and was accessible for both teachers and student teachers, with a total of 140 participants in the first round. In 2022 the further developed version 2.0 ran funded by the states of Schleswig-Holstein and Bremen ( $n = 80$ ), and was furthermore accessible for teachers from all states, most often financed by their institutions. Moreover, the courses opened for social workers and generally interested people, such as parents. Further federal states have finalized the accreditation, e.g. Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, and the program can be found in multiple databases, e.g. for Nordrhein-Westfalen. Accreditation for further federal states and nationwide educational leave (Bildungsurlaub) are pending. Every year, the project sponsors 15 places for students in each of the 16 federal states. The strategy of accreditation and state-funded access aims for institutionalized embeddedness and access for the teachers.

### **Digital architecture**

The seminar programme is located on a website ([www.teach-love.de](http://www.teach-love.de)) with a personal log-in member area. In the member area, one can enter the course and have access to additional exclusive material, such as expert interviews. Once the participant enters the course, all modules (see Table 1) are displayed. One can then enter each module, including several videos, audio (e.g. meditations), a detailed script with prompts, information on further readings and media content, and PDFs for the guided reflexive journal, just as practical cases/vignettes, and material for knowledge transfer and implementation in the school. There is a live chat, available at all times (with experts answering within 24 hours). After every module, there is a quick questionnaire, checking the relevance of the input, including a box for feedback and questions. Within the modules, participants are free to work chronologically or follow their interests depending on preferences and learning type. After the final module, there is a multiple-choice exam (participants have 3 trials and must reach 75 % correct answers) and an upload option for a portfolio to obtain the certificate.

### **Formats and approach**

The main format is video input, with video frequencies varying from 4 to 90 minutes, depending on the depth and complexity of the topic, with an overall duration of 20 hours of video input, exclusive of the additional readings and journaling. The program is open for three months and can be prolonged by 8 weeks afterward. Within the modules, the didactic follows a three-step approach with a) input alongside the current state of knowledge and digital live consultation and supervision with the lecturers b) reflexive work on the self, and

c) knowledge transfer and application into practice. Furthermore, we d) embed the project in a larger social context, including outward communication and community work.

### **Input**

The project is independent and builds on pro bono work from a network of experts, bringing together insights and competencies from different fields and practices. As such, specific topics are covered by experts from the field. Besides the author being the project lead, being responsible for the theorizing, didactic, and evaluations, the team includes Madita Oeming with expertise in porn studies, the sex- and couples therapist Dr. Meriam Axtman with expertise in interculturality, Anna Woszczyk, a holistic midwife, and Ilona Westphal, an expert on sexuality and special needs (handicap). The input is emotion- and value-based and entails theoretical frames on different currently applied paradigms but also critical theory aiming for profound competence and the ability to handle ambivalent stances (e.g. by a critical humanist stance, including understanding subjects as reasonable within their situativity [Schraube & Højholt, 2019]), developing contexts, ambivalences and change. The principle of paradigmatic pluralism means, that different stances are included and presented as legitimate, including their inherent reasoning for pluralistic understandings. The didactic emphasizes that every subject has a personal position that makes sense and is valuable, and that research at times is ambivalent or even inconsistent, with sex education still being a learning field. However, the goal is to take a stance of being accepting and understanding towards the different perspectives, acting by the ideals of humanism.

### **Reflection and introspection**

Alongside the cognitive educational part, every module includes *reflexive and introspective* parts. These aim for training to zoom in and out of cognition, emotion, intuition, and the body and are guided by supervising questions in a reflexive journal. To do so, participants are firstly sensitized to stereotypes and presumptions, to then work on their own stance alongside personal experiences and beliefs, normatively prescribed scripts, social conditions, and assumptions about the self, others, and objectives. Moreover, the program includes audio formats with meditations, aiming to reactivate the connection with the body, visions, imagination, and higher values.

### **Knowledge transfer**

Finally, the team of experts works result- and process-oriented with practical examples and vignettes to apply knowledge transfer into practice. While doing so, we emphasize variety in solutions and invite for modification, aiming for the capable self, to develop their own solutions applicable and suitable for their specific context.

### **Community and public discourse**

To meet the need for community and reciprocal communication flow, we maintain social media channels, inviting casual and reciprocal communication, sharing tips, anecdotes, and insights from the project and experts, e.g. therapists, academic scholars, authors, survivors of sexual abuse, sex pedagogues, teachers, sex workers, and social workers.

Beyond the digital formats, analog events in educational festivals and community days are held, including presentations, panels, workshops, and discussions to meet physically. Finally, the project works with public media, radio, magazines, newspapers, TV, and

influencers, advocating for communication, and open discourses against myths, cancel-culture and discretization, and stereotypes.

**Content**

The program takes the stance of the social self—with humans being relational beings, acting reasonably in their social context (Gergen, 2011)— and focuses on well-being, sexualities and their meanings, relationship competencies, social- and digital contexts, and overall not only physical but psychological and emotional health. There is an emphasis on topics, that seem relevant in contemporary conditions of life, such as interculturalism, sexual violence, and LGBTQIA+, and pressing in terms of the everyday life of the younger generations, such as media use, online dating, and porn consumption. Lastly, the course contains education on health and work with corporeality.

**Table 1: Course modules**

1. Welcome, Critical Theory and Paradigmatic Stance
2. Problematization, Paradigms, and Definitions
3. Media and Technologies
4. Sexual Role, Identity, Sexuality, and Self
5. LGBTQIA+, Diversity & Inclusion
6. Intercultural perspectives
7. Optional Excursus: Reproduction, Organs, and Menstruation, Family Formations
8. Porn-license (pornography competence)
9. The Self and the Others (including Stereotypes and Presumptions)
10. Physical, Psychological, and Developmental Health, Well-being, and Resilience
11. Violence, Security, Prevention
12. Case Practice and Knowledge Transfer for Implementation

**Paradigm and Theoretical Foundation**

Besides the obvious goal of enabling the teachers to become competent sex educators, the project aims to enhance their own health and resilience and moreover, in a critical tradition, reflect on everyday conditions in life. This is anticipated by engaging in profound theoretical reflection and theorization, inviting to reconnect with emotions, higher values, and visions. To do so, both the look of the platform, videos, and material and the attitude of the lecturers are deliberately positive and aim to be perceived as attractive through optimism and acceptance (safe space), communication (being agile and responsive), and community (networking and open channels).

### **Evaluation: Teachers Professionalisation via applied critical community psychology**

Evaluation, as a quality assurance procedure, was used to a) improve the program, b) evaluate digital education programs, and c) monitor whether and how continuous education can have empowering effects and lead to positive change on intra- and intersubjective levels. For the evaluation, we conducted an ex-post measure design, including a survey and interviews (Döring & Bortz, 2016). The survey was offered at the end of the course within the member area and contained questions regarding the feasibility of format, extent, and effort, but also the worth and relevance of the modules and topics, lecturers, and their communication, motivation, and learning process. This includes whether the video length was reasonable and effective, how the journaling and reading were perceived, and open-ended questions for general feedback. A 5-point Likert scale was used. 61 participants completed the survey, which we will present (for power reasons) with descriptive statistics, focussing on the most relevant results for format, content, effects, and further needs.

Additionally, we conducted 32 interviews with participants for an in-depth understanding. Fourteen teachers taught at primary schools (grades 1-4 with pupils ages between 6 and 10 years) and 18 taught at high schools (grades 5 to 13 with pupils ages between 11 and 18). The interviewees were between 21 and 67 years old. 18 teachers were female, and 14 were male, three females and two males were sexually oriented as homosexual, none identified as diverse in terms of sexual identity. The interviews had a length of between 38 and 110 minutes. Teachers could come from any discipline, however, 11 of the primary school teachers teach a combination of biology/geography/nature (“Sachkunde”), and 9 of the high school teachers are biology teachers. All of the participants are registered in Germany (as citizens), however, 28 % report a non-European ethnic background.

The quantitative data showed that 69% of the participants worked continuously throughout the 3 months, 14% consumed all videos in the first weeks, and 15% completed the seminar at the very end of the duration and before the deadline. A majority (71 %) of the participants reported that they were “very concentrated” throughout the video input, e.g. taking notes and watching carefully, while 18 % reported sometimes listening while doing something else like cooking/doing a cardio workout. Seventy two percent evaluated the duration as a good estimate and as doable, 12 % as overwhelming, who at times selected certain topics and jumped others over (most often skipped was the biology module), and 16 % wanted to have more input, being motivated to invest more time.

The participants evaluated the following topics as most relevant: online dating (28.6%), pornography (47.6%), LGBTQIA+ (61.9%), relationship competence (52.4%), therapeutical perspectives (79%), and case studies and practice (85.7%). The module deemed least relevant was biology (less than 2 %).

Sixty one percent of participants reported being interested in additional analog group meetings/ workshops, and 33 % were interested in personal supervision. Seventy one percent requested more insights into sexual abuse and prevention. Sixty four percent reported gaining new knowledge about themselves and others and evaluated this as personally worthy, and 48 % found the course had a positive impact on their personal relationships. Eighty nine percent asked for educational material to be applied in school. Eighteen percent asked for continuous education on teaching the topic of sex education in inclusive settings and disabilities.

Through the qualitative evaluation and interviews, we gained in-depth insights based on four main categories and differentiated in several subcategories depicted in Figure 2.

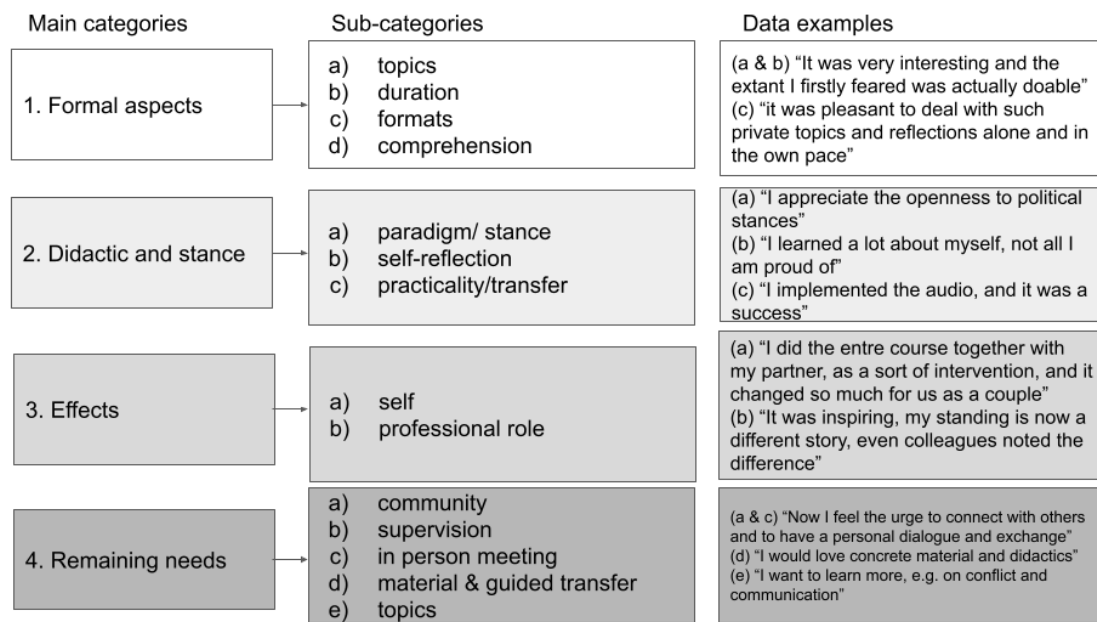


Figure 2: Categories of evaluation

The main categories include *formal aspects* and the *didactic and stance*. Both categories gave insights into acceptability, applicability, and ways of working while self-regulating within asynchronous education formats and the acceptability of emotion- and value-based sex education. *Effects* were described in terms of the self and the professional role. Finally, the data pointed to the *remaining needs*. Below, the findings are depicted, including data examples.

I found it liberating to finally target all the difficult topics head-on, usually being taboo or covered in political correctness until they become an absurdity. (male, 41, high school teacher)

The video input longer than 40 minutes was too much. I split those into parts. The rest was working fine (...) I especially like the tonality, it motivated me and I could take some of that optimism and expressions with me. (...) Three months duration was also fine for me, even with the kids. (female 38, high school teacher)

The digital format worked better than expected. I was comfortable with it and I liked the option to go back and forth and jump over, what I already knew or found irrelevant for the age group. (female, 29, primary school teacher)

I enjoyed the introspection. For the first time in my entire education, my own experiences played a role. Working like this affected me positively. (female, 28, primary school teacher)

I feel well-prepared now, especially helpful, were the concrete verbalizations, e.g. for talking with parents. (female, 31, high school teacher)

With respect to the formal aspects (topics, duration, formats, comprehension), the participants indicated effective knowledge implementation. Regarding the format of a

prerecorded digital education, participants evaluated it as fortunate to self-regulate their time and effort and felt respected in their roles as full-time teachers and caregivers. Furthermore, it was emphasized that the digital format allowed for privacy regarding sensitive topics. The participant reported on the educative side to have enhanced both their factual knowledge, insights about themselves, and competence, aligned with their needs. The journaling in the reflexive parts, too, was evaluated positively, often experienced as acknowledging, and as a novel approach that has not been part of their education so far and enhancing their competence. Furthermore, during the interviews, the participants could recall several concrete topics and approaches, indicating successful knowledge transfer. This regards all three types of knowledge, (meta)theoretical knowledge/background knowledge, factual knowledge, and knowledge application.

After a while, I even felt somewhat attached to the lecturer, and once I cried because I was really touched. I felt seen and taken seriously. My colleagues asked me if something had happened. What happened was, that I took advice from the seminar with me to school. I foremost remember the mantras something like “assuming the best in the actions of the other” and also “validate and acknowledge, explore and de-dramatize”. I liked the concrete suggestions and I felt the atmosphere was inspiring, and those principles seem very practical. (female, 32, primary school teacher)

I feel excited and motivated, overall I learned a lot. It was just like being at university again. I enjoyed reading and exploring again, and that the seminar did not shy away from all the hot topics, and that no morals were applied. I liked the honesty, that some topics remain so far unresolved. Actually, I overall felt relief and I still feel relieved, I am okay, and they [pupils and parents] are okay, too. (female, 32, high school teacher)

It was inspiring how the seminar effortlessly included different political stances, without being judgemental. That was my favorite part. It left space for me and space for respect towards everyone. It had so many pleasant effects, on my self-confidence and on my motivation, and they truly seem to stand by what they lecture. I liked the part when they say, we are dogmatic undogmatic. (female, 42, high school teacher)

Concerning the didactic and stance, it seemed, that there was great value placed in emotion- and value-based and paradigmatical pluralistic sex education. Noticeably, participants generally used many emotion-related expressions throughout the interviews, such as “playful”, “happy”, “relief”, “motivating”, “fun”, “seeing the light”, “touching”, “calm”, and “exciting”. Participants appreciated the didactic for abstract information, background knowledge, and hands-on practical implications with an emphasis on pluralism and humanistic acceptance, which had positive effects on the self, e.g., for feeling respected and validated, easing acceptability of the program, but also being helpful when applied in practice, with positive effects for learning settings, understanding for others (e.g., the pupils) stances and handling of the social context.

I conducted parts of the seminar together with my spouse, and it had definitely transformative effects on us. (male, 55, high school teacher)

It was liberating in two ways, I feel liberated regarding my history and I feel at peace with my role at school. Maybe I am not doing great, but better, and today I know why it's difficult, and it is not only because of me. (female, 41, primary school teacher)

I memorized many of the examples and today use them in my teaching! This regards my attitude but also concrete formulations. Throughout the program, I worked a lot on my presumptions, and today, I have zero trouble with provocative questions or conservative parents, I have them all twisted around my accepting attitude (laughs). This makes a huge difference. (female, 27, primary school teacher)

The biggest change is, that I have not a single negative emotion no matter what I am confronted with. Understanding that all subjects are acting reasonably, somehow helped me a lot, and what also helped is to understand, that it is not about being either uptight or vulgar but focusing on the meaning and concerns behind the topics. This changes everything. (male, 38, high school teacher)

I feel like a sex ed wizard now (laughs). It is indeed quite fun for me and I feel a genuine connection with my pupils, I see them for their needs and urges! (female, 28, primary school teacher)

The effects of emotion- and value-based education on the topic of sexuality and relationship competence beyond factual knowledge seemed to have a positive impact on the self. Teachers showed a willingness to invest in educating themselves, seemed eager to learn, and seemed open to change. This was demonstrated when they started meeting pupils with paradigmatic openness and a radical accepting attitude. It became apparent, how sex education is a lifelong process and how teachers gain from continuous professionalisation. Resulting change was reported in regard to their self (relationship competence, reflexivity, and social roles), and their professional role (skills, motivation, and competence in sex education and general in school). Many referred during the interviews to episodes of observable positive change in their attitude, mentioned by colleagues, and successful newly implemented measures at schools, indicating that change was also implemented in practice.

Sometimes the lecturer was maybe too much of an expert, and we lost the context of school” (male, 51, high school teacher)

I liked the digital camps, but I am also interested in meeting as a group (female, 28, primary school teacher)

After the program, I felt a bit odd, with all those insights going back to the biology book from 1972 (male, 31, high school teacher)

On the critical side, some limits concerning the digital format were formulated. As such, participants reported that videos longer than 30 minutes were overstraining and impractical. Further, some participants wished for a download function and audio formats, so that they could listen to the training while commuting.

Concerning the content and didactic, a few participants urged for less (meta)theoretical background knowledge and instead wished for more practical implications and more focus on concrete references to everyday tasks in school. However, taking the evaluated effects on the self into account, for now, the Teach Love team will hold on to the background knowledge and theoretical foundation, which was evaluated as being crucial for the didactic and positive effects.

The vast majority of participants asked for concrete teaching material alongside the topics, which indicates, that the transfer was overburdening (due to remaining insecurity in applying the newly learned principles and insights or time limitations). Finally, many participants asked for additional in-person group meetings or supervision to discuss the new insights and get in contact with like-minded teachers.

## **The potential of applied community psychology in teachers' professionalization**

The evaluation showed how the didactic bridging of background knowledge and theorizing, evidence-based knowledge, reflexive work on the self, and practical implication can lead to enhanced knowledge and profound competence. Through a focus on critical theory, its principles such as a radical humanistic stance and resulting emotion- and value-based approaches, teachers are enabled to navigate both their own experiences and the needs of other stakeholders (pupils, parents, colleagues, and institutions). Hence, teachers feel better about themselves, their relationships, their social role, and their responsibilities, e.g. when working with pupils and gaining their trust or parents.

The critical dilemma of implicit reverse and negative effects (e.g. victimization, hierarchization) in the attempt to 'empowering others' (Kagan et al., 2020), seems dissolved, through paradigm crossing and critical humanist inclusiveness, result- and process-orientation, and the participatory and strength-based approach. These principles seem to invite identification and community building, trust, and related courage and willingness to make a change.

The applied critical stance (Murphy & Fleming, 2010) seems to lead effectively to a pluralistic and humanist and incorporated attitude impeding mechanisms of polarization, and instead increasing competence in handling polarization. This applies to the work with pupils, but also colleagues and parents, leading to relief and optimism and a positive impact on the community. The approach of emotion- and value-based sex education exempts teachers from the fear of risking the self and sexualizing the youth. By the strategy of drawing on the matter of meaning behind factual knowledge and techniques, teachers are capable of handling heated and possibly provocative questions, by re-navigating the value, matter, and meaning behind them—away from techniques and skills, to psychological concerns, with scope for ambivalences and individualism.

Through reflexive work on the self, increased self-esteem, and knowledge gain, teachers become confident in their experience in life and professionalism, and can constructively handle heteronormous conjunctural experiences and beliefs, both between the self and the group, and within the group. As such, teachers are able to fulfill their desire and responsibility to make a change for the better and increase their agency. Subsequently, the evaluation indicates the potential of emotion- and value-based, pluralistic, and critical humanist professionalisation on the topic of sex education for the teacher's self (confidence, optimism), competence (professional role), and resilience (skills to organize the self) and their practical tasks (handling teaching assignments in polarized fields). Additionally, one can speculate about the positive effects of confident teachers impeding polarization for the larger context in their communities beyond pupils, colleagues, and institutions.

Finally, the evaluation demonstrates that digital formats are acceptable and effective when adequately set up and must not be prohibitive to positive learning mechanisms such as



identification. However, digital learning settings, no matter how interactive, seem not to sufficiently compensate for corporeal social connection and cohesion in the physical realm. As many advantages could be carved out (such as accessibility and inclusion), it remains an individualized practice lacking reciprocal communication and in-person connectivity.

Further research could explore the youth's perspective, conditions, and the role of trust between pupils and educators as one factor for successful sex education learning settings. Moreover, structured observations could serve with insights into the depicted changes in actual practice in schools, beyond the subjective self-assessment of teachers grounding this contribution.

## Conclusion

The study explored how applied critical community psychology can function as a positive intervention in challenging settings of pedagogical practice pertaining to sex education, having positive effects on teachers' sense of self, their professionalisation, and the anticipated effects on the community. Positive effects include not only gains in factual knowledge, but also optimism, confidence, practical skills, and competence, resulting in improved resilience and professional and social role. Based on the participants' perceptions, these effects lead to positive implementation of change in the schools, with potential positive effects on pupils, colleagues, and the community. Hence, the findings indicate, how applied critical theory and the related humanist stance can be incorporated by educated teachers and afferents to impede political polarization.

In addition to the thematic, didactic, and format-related insights, this contribution shall remind the actors taking part in the discourse around sex education to reflect on the ongoing polarization, including their mechanisms (e.g. fear of discretization) and the resulting negative consequences for practice and practitioners.

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