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HIDDEN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS IN SEX AND RELATIONSHIP EDUCATION**

Abstract. *In the field of relationship and sex education, a clear consensus on which values should be taught is missing, with the field being a battleground of competing ideologies, each defending its own version of truth. Despite being designed for the general population and being frequently implemented in public schools, many prevention programmes incorporate religious principles. Through discourse analysis, the article reveals these hidden beliefs (often embedded in terminology or objectives), stressing that religious principles do not need to be completely eliminated from those programmes. Such principles should instead be presented transparently to allow participants to make informed choices about their romantic relationships and whether the programme is suitable for them.*

Keywords: *sex education, adolescent romantic relationships, prevention programmes, hidden religious beliefs, human rights.*

INTRODUCTION

The issue of sex education has always been a topical political issue. Religion has played an important role in this, advocating abstinence outside of marriage. When it comes to sexuality and sex education, different religions such as Islam and Christianity have common grounds in their fundamental norms. Religions and faith-related institutions still reserve for themselves the right to take a unique view on what sex education should be and when it should start (Zimmerman 2015). Sex education always contains an ideological dimension, which means its conceptualisation must not be built on assumptions and instead be carefully considered. At the same time, there is no universal or indisputable consensus on which approach is optimal in all possible contexts encountered while working with young people. One approach is often perceived to be an example of good practice by some, yet as controversial by others (Jones 2015). Close attention must be paid to the design of programmes when they are to be implemented in a public school setting.

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Sex education began to develop intensively in the 20th century and has since been the focus not just of various religions, but of ideologies in general. Above all, the main question has concerned their appropriate content: should they discourage young people from having sex before marriage, be limited to the human anatomy, or should they dare be broader (Zimmerman 2015)? Prevention programmes thus differ by their content and objectives – what they aim to teach adolescents, or what they aim to protect them from. Most importantly, there is no firm agreement on what is right or wrong, or which values young people should (not) be taught. More generally, Kovač Šebart and Krek (2009) argue that in societies where several different worldviews and value systems coexist, it is impossible to base an education system on a single viewpoint, but the broadest possible consensus on what is considered right/wrong should be sought. Even though public schools cannot be completely neutral, they can be guided by shared democratic values. Their role is to support the legal and moral foundations of democracy while avoiding indoctrination. Neutrality should accordingly be understood as avoiding education that promotes specific ideologies rather than excluding all political and religious content from education (Hugaas 2026). The public school's role is to provide students with education about diverse values and enable each individual to develop their own worldview. Both the aims and the content of education should be aligned with this principle. In contemporary society, public schools must not be based on a particular value system presented as the only correct one since this imposes value judgments and denies human diversity. Instead, education should reflect the highest possible level of shared consensus. Human rights in this context serve as an organising principle of the educational framework of public schools, particularly in value-related domains, as they help prevent ideological conflicts and the imposition of beliefs on students (Krek and Metljak 2011). Sex education often forms part of the compulsory public school curriculum. Many believe that school is precisely the place where the giving of sex education is most appropriate and necessary (Barriuso-Ortega et al. 2024). Whether included in a school subject or as part of activity days, the mentioned education should follow the principles of human rights. Thus, any activity carried out in a public school – whether conducted by teachers or by external providers – must be carefully considered, with its content and objectives made transparent and, notably, it should assure that every student can independently decide on the kind of romantic relationships they desire. However, this is not always the case; even though preventive programmes are promoted as being appropriate for the school environment, they do not always fully adhere to these principles.

Through discourse analysis, this article seeks to examine the ways in which religious beliefs are embedded – either explicitly or implicitly – in school-based prevention programmes and to identify how religious discourse shapes programme content and objectives. The article additionally aims to clarify the possible consequences of hidden religious beliefs in preventive programmes used in

public schools, with analysis being conducted of the content and objectives of different such programmes implemented in those schools. The analysis focuses primarily on prevention programmes implemented in the United States given that preventive efforts in this field are the most extensive there (Barriuso-Ortega et al. 2024). In contrast, European countries – most notably Sweden – tends to call for more liberal prevention programmes not based solely on fear-mongering about sexually transmitted diseases but which instead concentrate on the individual and their right to make their own decisions regarding their body and life (Zimmerman 2015), and preventive programmes implemented as educational programmes are rare because Sweden takes a much more holistic approach to sex education (Barriuso-Ortega et al. 2024). Therefore, no programme in the area of sex education originating from these otherwise progressive countries was included in the analysis. In Slovenia and elsewhere, sex education is typically delivered as either part of the compulsory curriculum, for instance within biology, or by external providers commissioned by schools. In this context, there are no clearly defined criteria on who may serve as a provider or what the content should include, with this generally being left to the discretion of individual schools. In Slovenia, sex education is part of health education delivered in the framework of compulsory elective content (Žalar et al. 2013).

By analysing programmes implemented in the United States, the article reveals the ways in which religious beliefs are embedded in the curricula of preventive education programmes. The findings highlight the importance of critically examining programme content while developing and introducing similar programmes in Slovenia. The need for transparent, evidence-based approaches in the development of prevention programmes is underscored, especially when they are to be used in a public school.

PREVENTION IN ADOLESCENT ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

Although adolescent romantic relationships resemble adult relationships on the outside, they vary mainly by the function they serve. Rather than entering relationships with the intention of forming a long-term union or establishing a family, they provide a testing ground for learning and self-discovery (young people engage in romantic relationships as a developmental context in which they practise social skills, explore their identities, and experiment with relational roles) (Collins et al. 2009). The development of adolescent romantic relationships follows a recognisable trajectory: early childhood experiences are characterised by infatuations, crushes, and very brief relationships that gradually lengthen and become more complex in late adolescence (Beckmeyer 2015). It is via these relational experiences that young people gain insights about themselves and their emerging sexuality, which contemporary research suggests is considerably more fluid than was previously assumed (Stewart et al. 2019).

Several authors suggest that adolescent romantic relationships can be a risk factor for several problems (e.g., Seefeldt et al. 2003; Kansky and Allen 2018;

Joyner and Udry 2000), for the development of a confused identity (Furman and Shafer 2003), low self-esteem (Wendt 2019), and the emergence of depression (Collins 2003), emotional and behavioural problems (Davies and Windle 2000), and violence in relationships (Wekerle and Avgoustis 2003). At the same time, some note they can be both a risk factor and a protective factor, holding both negative and positive consequences largely depending on the quality of the relationship. Adolescent romantic relationships do not carry negative consequences per se, and thus not all adolescent relationships are something young people should be prevented from having (Kansky and Allen 2018). On the contrary, adolescent romantic relationships play a valuable role in several areas of a person's development, such as identity development, the transformation of family relationships, the development of close relationships with friends, the development of sexuality, academic achievement, and career planning, and can also be a protective factor by serving as a way of correcting family patterns and trauma from the primary family (Furman and Shaffer 2003; Beckmeyer and Weybright 2020). It is precisely due to prevention programmes' importance for young people's lives and development that they began to develop. They first took shape and expanded most prominently in Europe and the United States, initially focusing on sex education, but later broadening their scope. A well-designed prevention programme can help young people acquire knowledge and skills that add to the likelihood of them having positive experiences in early romantic relationships and avoiding relationships that might be harmful. To avoid negative outcomes, the programmes must be designed with utmost care and be appropriate for the young people's developmental stage and by taking account of the wide-ranging contexts in which adolescents live and the diversity of their characteristics and lived experiences generally (Barber and Eccles 2003). Prevention programmes vary widely around the world (Barriuso-Ortega et al. 2024). The content of the programmes is quite diverse, ranging from topics like sexual behaviour and contraception to sexual pleasure and human rights. Most educational programmes address multiple topics at once, making it difficult to identify consistent patterns across different time periods, geographical regions, political systems, cultural or religious contexts. Although the growing emphasis on Relationships and Sexuality Education has expanded the scope of the contents, it has led to greater diversity rather than standardisation. As a result, new and hybrid combinations of topics continue to emerge. Notwithstanding the introduction of international frameworks, the field remains characterised by fragmentation and uncertainty as opposed to comprehensive and coordinated approaches (van Leent et al. 2023).

WHERE DO RELIGIOUS BELIEFS APPEAR IN PREVENTION?

The content of relationship and sex education entails considerable variation around the world, as does the prevalence of programmes. In countries where state and religion are closely intertwined, religious beliefs are expected to form a fundamental part of such programmes. In Saudi Arabia, sex education is viewed

as valuable for the preservation of social values, and for upholding the Islamic moral codes. Engaging religious scholars is seen as necessary to make sure that the information provided is in line with Islamic teaching (Horanieh et al. 2020). Even though Saudi prevention programmes are few in number, religious beliefs constitute an integral part and are not hidden. On the contrary, prevention accompanied by religious content is regarded as the only possible approach. In contrast, Western countries base their approach to sex and relationship education on the idea of human rights. This is particularly evident in European countries for which the Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe were developed. The Standards stipulate that sex education should be culturally, socially and sexually sensitive, based on the concepts of sexual and reproductive human rights, gender equality and self-determination, together with the acceptance of diversity, as well as scientifically accurate information (Standards for Sexuality Education in Europe 2010). In Western countries, Christian religion is predominant, and the state is formally separated from the church. Therefore, these principles are not adhered to if religious beliefs are included in adolescent prevention, especially when taught in public schools. Such religious beliefs may nonetheless be implicitly embedded in prevention programmes since they are largely woven into underlying cultural assumptions, even when they remain hidden.

Religious beliefs are rarely expressed directly or unequivocally. Instead, such beliefs are many times conveyed implicitly using specific terminology; for example, when the word marriage is used in ways that present it as the only logical progression of adolescent romantic relationships. While not every romantic relationship continues into marriage, it is presented as a goal to which all young people must strive, and prevention will assist them achieve that goal. Such terminology is already seen in the title of some prevention programmes, for example: “Pre-marital Interpersonal Choices and Knowledge” and “Connections: Relationships and Marriage”. The word is repeated in the prevention programme and its contents and objectives. The programme “Connections: Relationships and Marriage” is divided into four lessons. Lesson 4 is simply called “marriage”. The lesson is partly made up of teaching units in which the word appears several times, such as “Lesson 13: Roadblocks to Relationships; Compatibility Counts Before You Marry” (The Dibble Institute n.d.). This is not merely the title of the lesson since it reflects an underlying religious belief because the Christian tradition views marriage as sacred, holding that “what therefore God has joined together, let not man separate” (English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Matthew 19:6). The terminology employed warrants careful scrutiny, as it fundamentally shapes and determines the content of a programme. Religious convictions are also found in the very objectives of prevention programmes where the aim of prevention is often described as promoting positive attitudes to marriage and preventing divorce, or changing the idea among young people that divorce is acceptable. Gardner and colleagues (2004) analysed the effectiveness of a prevention programme called “Connections: Relationship and Marriage” in altering such views:

A second major aim of this evaluation of Connections was to assess changes in attitudes that affect future behaviours. We assessed attitudes towards marriage, divorce, cohabitation, likelihood of their future marriages ending in divorce, and premarital and marital counselling and marriage enrichment. Results showed that for attitude toward marriage, the Time X Group interaction was significant, indicating that Connections students reported a slight increase in their likelihood of seeing marriage as a good and desirable thing, whereas the control group reported slightly less favourable attitudes toward marriage over time. (Gardner 2004, 524)

To the best of the author's knowledge, the mentioned analysis is the sole one conducted to date. Marriage is presented as a goal that all romantic relationships should lead to, which overlooks the fact that relationships in which the partners are not married can also be satisfying.

Attitudes toward marriage were more positive for the Connections group, such that they were more likely to agree with the idea that marriage is generally a good and desirable institution and that they would likely marry someday, compared with students in the control group. (Gardner 2004, 525)

The aim of such the programmes is therefore to influence the view that marriage is desired by everyone, and hence is a goal to strive towards. By so doing, it does not distinguish young people who are religious from those who are not, or whose religion takes a different view to that of Christianity.

Several programmes used mainly in public schools or designed for the general population consistently use the word marriage, such as the PICK programme: "A healthy progression of commitment, conversations about commitment, cohabitation, and the benefits of marriage are examined and explored in small and large group activities/discussions" (PICK a partner n.d.). Some programmes not only promote marriage but also aim to change attitudes regarding divorce. For instance, in the Connections programme: "Hypothesis four suggested that student attitudes toward divorce would change after taking the curriculum" (Gardner 2001, 5). Even though the prevention programme is not intended to be overtly religious, the stated aim is still to change young people's beliefs that divorce is acceptable, which stems from religious beliefs: Gardner's results show that before the programme students somewhat generally agreed that divorce is an important and acceptable option in certain circumstances. After completing the curriculum, their views shifted somewhat toward disagreeing with these statements, indicating less acceptance of divorce (Gardner 2001). This goal is not reflected upon and is instead understood as self-evident, logical, and as simply correct with application to the whole population. In fact, the programme is aimed at all adolescents as well as being implemented in schools: "Designed for use in schools and youth organizations, Connections' material aligns with

national standards and integrates with most textbooks. Content is non-religious, non-sexual and based on current research” (The Dibble Institute n.d.). Like with other programmes: “To date, the PICK programme has been used with numerous populations. It has been taught in middle schools, high schools, universities, non-profit organizations, domestic violence shelters, churches, and in all branches of the military” (PICK a partner, n.d.).

One of the tenets of the Catholic faith is that sex is only permissible within marriage and for the purpose of procreation; sex just for pleasure, even within marriage, is indecent (Jogan 2023). This belief is seen in numerous prevention programmes in more or less a subtle way. “The Relationship Smarts programme also sends the message to teens that developing positive relationships, waiting until marriage to have sex and children, and fully committing to another person is the ideal relationship model” (Pearson 2007). The programme interprets a romantic relationship which follows the principles of faith as the ideal relationship that should be emulated by all (believers and non-believers alike) since is implemented for the general population and not in the context of Church programmes. It thereby interprets the principle of faith as a commonly known fact. “In a culture that encourages casual sex and cohabitation without commitment and accepts premarital childbearing without commitment between parents, the Relationship Smarts program gives adolescents another model to aspire toward” (Relationship Smarts: Assessment of an Adolescent Relationship Education Program 2009).

The prevention programme problematises not only extramarital sex but even the cohabitation of unmarried couples. A central objective is to change attitudes in this respect.

There were significant increases in support of statements related to the delay in sex and having sex in marriage among those who began the program with below-average scores on these indicators. Below-average-scoring young people experienced a significant increase in agreement that teens should wait to have sex until after high school and that sex should only occur within the context of marriage. Forgoing cohabitation, in general, is a key component of the Relationship Smarts curriculum and adolescents experienced a significant decline over the course of the program in their level of agreement with the belief that it is a good idea to cohabit. The percentage who Strongly Agree in the benefit of cohabitation decreased from 30% to 20% over the course of the program. (Relationship Smarts: Assessment of an Adolescent Relationship Education Program 2009)

Marriage as the union solely between a man and a woman is one of the most firmly held tenets of the Catholic Church (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB] 2006). The Roman Catholic Church considers homosexual acts morally wrong for being incompatible with God’s plan for sexuality, which

is based on relationships between men and women, and oriented to reproduction. While the Church acknowledges that gay people exist, it rejects the practice of homosexuality (Kuhar 2015). In recent times, even though it may have somewhat softened its position on homosexuality as a 'sin', it remains the case that homosexuality is a deficient form of sexuality and that it is not the homosexual inclination as such which the Church rejects, but homosexual acts (Müller 2006). Current Church teaching on human sexuality is fundamentally flawed; in particular, its characterisation of a homosexual orientation as objectively disordered, homosexual acts as intrinsically disordered, and its opposition to legislation supporting same-sex civil unions, adoption, and protections against discrimination. The moral evaluation of sexual relationships should be grounded in principles of justice and love rather than outdated biological assumptions, misinterpretations of human experience, and a rigid gender binary (Salzman and Lawler 2020). While discrimination against sexual minorities is not necessarily directly linked to the Church, the unambiguous positions it holds on homosexuality mean it is quite likely that preventive programmes will exclude young people's non-heterosexual experiences from their curricula. Discrimination against sexual minorities is therefore shown in prevention programmes in that either they are completely glossed over, or programmes underline the union between a man and a woman as the only correct and natural one. "Each session was guided by an intervention manual and led by two co-facilitators (one male and one female), who modelled a healthy relationship" (Youth Relationships Project 2016). Such a union is defined as the ideal relationship because a healthy relationship sets the norm between healthy and unhealthy on heteronormativity. This kind of norm can be communicated quite subtly by programmes, with beliefs revealed in statements such as: "Similarly, adolescents raised outside of two-biological-parent families confront some relationship issues in terms of higher expectations to cohabit, lower expectations to marry, and fewer relationship role models" (Adolescents and Romantic Relationship Education Programs 2009). This refers to a belief that once again places men and women in the foreground as the only acceptable form of a romantic and sexual relationship.

Most often, however, such discrimination occurs in a way that almost completely silences sexual minorities. The description of one prevention programme contains the wording "This is an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum" (Relationship Smarts PLUS 5.0. 2024). Simply stating that a programme is LGBTQ-inclusive or is a safe space for all does not alter the fact that sexual minorities are ultimately ignored in the programme itself. The phrase assumes that a one-off mention is sufficient to give a sense of inclusion to individuals who do not identify as heterosexual, while the content exclusively portrays heterosexual relationships as the viable ones. Therefore, along with multiculturalism, it is necessary to add multisexualism to many programmes (Zimmerman 2015). The inclusion of sexual minorities is needed on all levels – in the choice of both the words and the content. Above all, it is necessary to consider that adolescence is a time of

exploring one's gender and sexual identity during which sexual experiences with people of the same sex are relatively common and not necessarily linked to one's sexual orientation later on in life. The search for sexual and gender identity is an important developmental task (Wendt 2019). This means that in prevention programmes what is included in relation to sexual and gender minorities is not as controversial as what is left out of the content. Completely omitting content about non-heterosexual experiences discriminates against sexual minorities. Through silence, non-heterosexual relationships are shown to be wrong and should not exist. Sexual and gender minorities are mentioned at the same time as a whole range of young people's non-heterosexual experiences, which developmentally are quite expected during adolescence (Stewart et al. 2019), are left out. Silence contributes to discrimination against minorities, whereas speaking openly about different sexual experiences and desires helps to normalise them and considers the theoretical facts about adolescents' romantic relationships and their exploration of sexual and gender identities.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIDDEN RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

Every curriculum contains certain values and cultural ideologies. It is impossible to teach without values (Zimmerman 2015). Bialystok and colleagues (2020) argue that sex education is an area where our fears and resentments are projected, causing more disruption than any other curriculum.

Human rights frameworks state that parents hold the right to raise their children with the religious or philosophical beliefs they consider most appropriate, which then also applies to relationship and sex education. The question of how to organise prevention programmes in a way that does not infringe this right is hardly new. In the 1970s, a Danish court ruled that sex education was consistent with this right since, although schools provided children and adolescents with basic information, parents could still supplement this with their own moral perspectives. The Court held that the implemented sex education neither indoctrinated specific sexual practices, nor prevented parents from guiding their children. It also stressed that schools must provide information and knowledge in a way that is objective, critical and realistic, and respects the religious and philosophical beliefs of parents (Zimmerman 2015). Nevertheless, some prevention programmes still implicitly claim religious beliefs are universal and the only correct way to live in a romantic relationship, notably the notion that marriage is the only possible goal of an adolescent romantic relationship and that divorce must be prevented because it is bad per se. The focus is thus on marriage as sacrosanct and not on the quality of the relationship, nor on the satisfaction the individual would/would not feel in a romantic relationship. The relationship must not come to an end, even if it is a source of suffering. Such a programme teaches adolescents that it is necessary to persevere in a relationship even when it is not a happy one or it is violent. Such messages do not contribute to the well-being and satisfaction of young people (and subsequently adults), and merely reinforce the

religious dogma that marriage is sacred, it must not be broken, and that sex is permitted exclusively within marriage.

Adolescents' religious attendance emerged as a key correlate of their receipt of sex education, with more frequent religious attendance associated with a greater likelihood of instruction about delaying sex and less likelihood of instruction about contraception. Religious institutions are a significant source of instruction about waiting until marriage to have sex but rarely offer birth control information. (Lindberg and Kantor 2022, 295)

While the Roman Catholic Church has long campaigned against any form of sex education, during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s it changed its position to defend programmes based solely on the idea of abstaining from pre-marital sex (Zimmerman 2015). In an analysis, Lindberg and Kantor (2022) emphasise the role of religiosity and religious institutions in sex education. Not all religious institutions automatically share the same views on sex education, albeit most are unlikely to include information on protection in their programmes. The authors note that research findings affirm that comprehensive sex education encompassing a range of topics helps to promote behaviours that reduce unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. This means that faith-based programmes could contribute to the greater likelihood of unwanted and teenage pregnancies, and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. Programmes that teach young people to wait until marriage to have sex are most obviously religiously tinged. Accordingly, particular beliefs rooted in religion appear relatively frequently in both the objectives of the programmes and the terminology used.

What does the inclusion of hidden religious beliefs and values in prevention programmes mean for young people in sexual minorities? Religious beliefs often align with traditional views on gender, gender norms, and the family structure. Valsecchi et al. (2025) argue that adherence to conservative values, particularly traditional gender norms, is often associated with negative attitudes to LGBTQ+ rights. Traditional values are many times used to legitimise anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments by portraying LGBTQ+ identities as threats to social stability or traditional family structures. Conforming with traditional gender norms is associated with a denial of LGBTQ+ discrimination. The exclusion of minorities in prevention programmes, or the stress on male and female as the only true example of a romantic relationship, clearly discriminates against young people who do not identify as heterosexual. Such definitions fall within the realm of symbolic discrimination, which Kuhar (2009) describes as discrimination that in some way is constituted as rational and justifiable; where you seemingly take the side of the minority and then reproduce the discourse that originally led to the expression of homophobia. Religious beliefs incorporated into a prevention programme can thus discriminate against young people in sexual minorities and make them feel that they are a deviation from the norm and hence undesirable, unhealthy or wrong, even if they do not say so in such a direct way.

PREVENTION SHOULD BE BASED ON THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Human rights are a universal, regulative idea in work involving humans, for the critical appraisal of theory, ethics and practice, and represent a universal norm in human work (Zaviršek et al. 2010). When it comes to prevention, human rights therefore serve only as a lens via which prevention programmes are judged. The focus is principally on free choice and the freedom to choose the way we wish to conduct our relationships. The latter point is also made by Wendt (2019) when stating prevention programmes should be based on core values and principles of human rights which allow a person to freely choose their own sexuality, while being treated equally and having the opportunity to co-determine their life. Yet, this does not mean that young people should be left to themselves to make their own choices. Free decision-making is only possible when sufficient and appropriate information is available. Adolescents need to make informed decisions, which explains the very high level of importance of prevention in this area. However, in order to truly pursue its objectives prevention must be based on theoretical and ethical foundations. People have the right to make informed decisions about their sex life at any stage of their lives. Sexual rights are the basis upon which one's sexual identity can be established, which also applies to adolescents, who must be able to make informed and confident decisions about their sexuality (Wendt 2019). Therefore, sex education, as well as programmes aimed at preventing romantic relationships, should be based on internationally recognised human rights. In particular, the right to education (Protocol No. 1 – Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights), which provides that parents have the right to provide their children with an upbringing and education consistent with their own religious and philosophical beliefs, while the state must take care to make sure the information or knowledge included in the curriculum is provided in an objective, critical and plural manner; Article 9, which elaborates the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; Article 14, which prohibits of discrimination so that the enjoyment of rights is guaranteed to all people without distinction as regards sex, race, colour, language, religion, political or another opinion, nationality or social origin, membership of a national minority, property, birth, or other status, which includes discrimination based on sexual orientation (Gomien 2009). Children also possess the right to their own opinion, and the right to be informed, namely, to be informed of all information relevant to a specific situation, while explanations must be age-appropriate, and everyone must be informed in a way they can understand (Selič 2004). Preventive programmes that are covertly religiously tinged (intentionally or not) violate these principles in many respects. They do not legally violate any article of the Human Rights Act as a fundamental document, but they disregard such rights as an idea or concept that in one way or another concerns the questions of liberty, equality or solidarity (fraternity) (Svetlič 2009).

MORE APPROPRIATE WAYS TO INCLUDE FAITH IN PREVENTION PROGRAMMES

Although religious beliefs in prevention cause certain dilemmas, this does not necessarily mean they must be completely removed from the field of prevention. Rasmussen (2010) argues that young people should not be exposed just to a single set of values which are based on religious, sexual or ethnic identity. Instead, she emphasises that secular approaches to sexuality education, much like religious perspectives, arise from specific value judgments concerning what constitutes effective and appropriate sex education. She adds (2010) states that debates surrounding sexuality education are increasingly polarised, particularly in the United States where persistent and intense conflicts over school-based sex education have contributed to entrenched positions in discussions about representing a range of value perspectives. More important than whether religious beliefs should be included in prevention is the question of where and how such prevention is provided. The majority of prevention programmes are used in the school environment, typically in public schools. Often, however, sex education is integrated into existing subjects such as biology or religion classes (Zimmerman 2015). This means that, whether delivered by schoolteachers or external providers, it is part of the school curriculum and compulsory for pupils. Such programmes should be religion-neutral. Secularism was the answer to the question of how a school that had become compulsory could accommodate the children of Catholics as well as those of freethinkers, Protestants, Muslims etc. Kodelja (1995) claimed that when a secular school is being discussed something that is independent of religions is meant, namely, a school that is not anti-religious but areligious. The word secular can also denote a way of thinking that does not rely on theology, even if a person is dealing with themes related to theology (Kodelja 1995).

Since prevention programmes are often implicitly compulsory (realised in the context of mandatory school classes), they should be secular. Still, secularism must be distinguished from laicism; the latter implies that all religious beliefs held by children should be forbidden, unlike with secularism that respects freedom of choice and imposes no religion or belief (Kodelja 1995). Prevention programmes with religious beliefs in their core can be acceptable provided that is clearly stated that they are based on religion, as opposed to the content of the prevention programme being clandestinely imbued with the Catholic Church's moral dogma in particular and being passed off as aimed at the general population. It is rare for a programme to communicate directly declare that it is based on faith, even though programmes state they are suitable for both school settings and religious institutions. As Zgaga (2002, 31) noted: "For those among them who particularly like to force themselves into school, we know well that they never openly present themselves as a partial view of some partial community, but rather as the 'general will and universally recognized truth'".

The venue used for implementing a prevention programme is crucial. If the programme is provided after school hours and in religious or faith-related

facilities, the programme might be entirely appropriate, even desirable. It would not even be necessary to directly describe the programme as 'religiously tinged'. Participants should be openly told that the programme is religiously oriented and those who wish to live according to the principles of their faith will have much to gain from it. If a programme is organised by a religious community on its own premises, this is made clear enough. Yet, when a programme is offered in a non-religious setting (e.g., school, youth centre, local community) its aims must be unambiguously stated, while the freedom to decide whether or not to attend must be guaranteed. It is essential to be able to choose freely how we wish to conduct our relationships and, in turn, the kind of programme we want to be involved in. Importantly, as soon as religion becomes mired in the terminology and religious beliefs are described as being universal and naturally given, the freedom of choice is taken away from individuals. Relationship and sex education should empower young people to find their own answers, not unilaterally teach what is right and wrong in the broader context of romantic relationships.

CONCLUSIONS

The development of prevention and sex education has always been influenced by parents and political forces not necessarily opposed to sex education but who wanted their own 'truths' about sexuality and relationships to be taught, not for their children to be corrupted by the ideas of others. The central dilemma has been constant: deciding whose values are appropriate for children and adolescents, who holds the authority to decide, and for which reasons (Zimmerman 2015). Prevention programmes aimed at adolescent romantic relationships are sometimes interwoven with beliefs and ideology (perhaps willingly, but generally unwittingly) since particular beliefs are so ingrained in a given culture that the programme's designers may well not even know about their religious origins. Religious beliefs are often not incorporated into relationship education programmes explicitly or formally and instead are implicit in the programmes' underlying assumptions, terminology, and educational objectives. Religious values are seen in the use of concepts like marriage, which is frequently presented as the normative and desirable progression of an intimate relationship. This assumption is further evident in programme content where educational units commonly focus on preparing young people for marriage, whereas alternative relationship trajectories receive little or no attention.

Moreover, religious beliefs appear to shape the stated goals of these programmes. Objectives such as preventing divorce, promoting positive attitudes to marriage, and encouraging pre-marital sexual abstinence reflect specific moral and ideological positions. Topics like contraception are simultaneously often omitted, making the information provided to participants not comprehensive. However, the principles of faith should not be relegated to individual objectives and terminology. Discourse of this nature covertly reinforces the idea that religious beliefs are universal, thereby discriminating not simply against

non-believers, but also adolescents in sexual and gender minorities who are often left out by the religiously tinged curriculum.

The implications of all of this make it essential to critically reflect on the personal beliefs and values of the programme developers and facilitators. The institutional context in which such programmes are implemented also warrants careful consideration. When relationship education is delivered in public schools, it should comply with the principles of secularism, inclusivity, and evidence-based practice to ensure equal access and relevance for all students, irrespective of their religious beliefs, sexual orientation, or relationship preferences.

The presence of implicit religious assumptions may hold several important consequences. These include the potential reinforcing of the idea that individuals should remain in intimate relationships even if they are unsatisfactory, a greater risk of adolescent pregnancy due to contraception-related education being excluded, and the portrayal of a sexual minority as a deviation from a presumed norm. Sex education in Slovenia is unregulated. The entrance of public health institutions or other organisations into the schoolroom should be regulated systematically to avoid negative impacts in the future (Švab et al. 2021). Consequently, the design and delivery of such programmes are largely left to individual schools and the initiative of the educators and other professionals involved. Using examples of sexuality education programmes developed in the United States, this article shows how religious beliefs may become embedded (intentionally or unintentionally) in programme content and objectives. Noting that the Slovenian public education system is founded on the principle of secularism, it is important that any sex and relationship education programme be subjected to critical reflection prior to it being implemented. With such a reflection, the goal is to identify and prevent the inclusion of implicit religious beliefs that could compromise the secular, inclusive and evidence-based nature of the educational practice. Prevention programmes containing religious content or principles should thus be clearly presented as such, and be delivered in appropriate venues so as to provide choice for all. Let those who wish to live according to their faith do so, while others without such views should be left to proceed in the way they desire.

DATA AVAILABILITY

No new research data were generated.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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PRIKRITA VERSKA PREPRIČANJA V SPOLNI VZGOJI IN VZGOJI ZA PARTNERSTVO

Povzetek. *Na področju spolne vzgoje in vzgoje za partnerstvo manjka soglasje o tem, katere vrednote naj bi posredovali mladim. Namesto tega področje ostaja bojišče različnih ideologij, od katerih vsaka zagovarja svoja normativna izhodišča. Številni preventivni programi vsebujejo verska prepričanja, čeprav so izvorno zasnovani za splošno populacijo in se pogosto izvajajo v javni šoli. Skozi analizo diskurza članek razkriva skrita prepričanja, ki se pogosto pojavljajo v terminologiji in ciljih programov, pri tem pa poudarja, da verskih prepričanj ni nujno povsem izključiti iz preventivnih programov. Preventivni programi morajo biti zasnovani transparentno zato, da lahko vsak izbere svoj način oblikovanja partnerskih odnosov.*

Ključni pojmi: *spolna vzgoja, mladostniški partnerski odnosi, preventivni programi, skrita verska prepričanja, človekove pravice.*