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Exploring Diverse Approaches for Sexuality Education Based on Virtues and Family Formation in the Age of UNESCO's Comprehensive Sexual Education

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Research context 1



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- ✓ **Family is a cornerstone of Latvian society:**
Recognised in the Constitution.
State's role in protecting marriage, family, and the rights of parents and children.
- ✓ **Global challenges (EU): family stability and demography:**
 - ✓ high divorce rates
 - ✓ single-parent families
 - ✓ low birth rate

Some numbers about family context in Latvia



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In 2020, Latvia had the highest divorce rates in the European Union (2.7 divorces per 1000 inhabitants).

In January 2024, 45.8% of families had a single parent with one or more minor children, and 37.6% of children were born out of wedlock. In 2023 the number of divorces was half of the number of marriages (Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, 2024).

Since 2000, the population in Latvia has decreased by 21.65 %.

=> There is a need of reinforcing youngsters' values and attitudes for the formation of strong families to ensure Latvia's sustainable socioeconomic development (Human Capital Development Council, 2023), with education playing a crucial role in this effort.

Research context 2



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RESEARCH DIRECTIONS at LU:

- ✓ Sexuality education and family-formation values in the normative documents of the Republic of Latvia, taking into account the cultural heritage of Latvian society
- ✓ A needs analysis (survey) for supporting teachers to implement virtue-based sexuality education for family formation literacy in Latvia (survey, 1200 respondents)
- ✓ International best practices in this field (literature review, educational initiatives)
- ✓ Assessing educational materials in Latvia

Sexuality education for family formation (SE4FF)



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The term 'sexuality education for family formation' (SE4FF) is understood as youngsters' preparation to live sexuality as an expression of responsible, faithful, and committed love in their future family.

SE4FF looks at sexuality education holistically, does not reduce it to health education, and includes such values as family, freedom, respect for life, chastity, fertility, and non-violence.

SE4FF is **inclusive**: its focus on traditional family values goes hand-in-hand with respect of individual **freedom** and rejection of any **discrimination or violence** based on sexual preferences or orientation.

Family models



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By focusing on the traditional family model, we build on **recent research on the influence of loving relationships between father and mother** on children mental health and academic success

Family systems theory describes how the family unit contains multiple subsystems (e.g., mother–father, mother–child, father–child networks) that are interconnected and interactively shape one another. Family system theory (Becvar RJ, Becvar DS, Reif LV, et al., 2023) Systems theory and family therapy: A primer.

Couple's relationships (relationship between a child's mother and father), is one key aspect of the family system that can influence child outcomes

“Parental Warmth and Flourishing” (Harvard, Human Flourishing Programme, Tyler J. VanderWeele et al., 2019).

Goldberg JS, Carlson MJ. 2014. Parents' relationship quality and children's behavior in stable married and Cohabiting families

Parkes A et al., 2019: Coparenting and parenting pathways from the couple relationship to children's behavior problems;

We acknowledge that the most important thing in children life is the **love and care they receive at home**, not the concrete family structure they live in. We do not intend to criticize single-parent families or other family models.

Approaches to sexuality education (SE)

Non-holistic

The physiology of fertility approach

«Safe sex» or «risk reduction» programs

«Risk avoidance» or «Abstinence» programs

Holistic

«Comprehensive sexuality education» approach”
(UNESCO et al., 2018)

The Virtue-Based Approach

Holistic sexuality education for family formation

Non-holistic approaches to SE

The physiology of fertility approach (Raith-Paula, 2018)

- Teaches reproductive processes **before puberty** (not about behavioral patterns)
 - Raises awareness about the origin of **life** within the context of **love**
-

«Safe sex» or «risk reduction» programs (e.g., Kirby & Coyle, 1997)

- **Assumption**: adolescents cannot avoid sexual intercourse
 - Focus: preventing STIs and unwanted pregnancies through **contraception**.
 - “Risk compensation effect” (Hanley & de Irala, 2010): focus on safety increases risky behaviour
 - No information about psychological consequences of early sex / contraception (Hill, 2019)
-

The abstinence-only approach (Ott & Santelli, 2007)

- Promotes **delaying** sexual behaviour until marriage.
- Different **motivations**:
 - abstinence for health reasons
 - abstinence based on religious beliefs

Holistic approaches to sexuality education

UNESCO's (2018) Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE).

- Based on human rights and gender equality (Braeken et al., 2010)
 - Emphasis: risk reduction, not on risk avoidance nor womens' health (Obeleniene, 2022; Santelli et al., 2017)
-

The Virtue-Based Approach (Beltramo, 2022; Lickona, 2013).

- Emphasizes **virtuous character**, sees sexuality as **one of the fields** for enacting virtues
 - Information provided to young people is **tailored**:
 - **Initial focus** on character building and risk avoidance
 - Risk reduction strategies only if there is an explicit **choice of risky behaviour**
-

Holistic sexuality education for family formation (Carter, 2017)

- Merges virtue-based and physiology-based models within **responsible love**.
- Values of family formation (love, responsibility, openness to life, trust in relationships) as the main **framework for sexuality education**

SE4FF:

Example 1

«My fertility matters» (MFM)



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MFM by far the largest sexuality education program in Germany. Being implemented in 14 European countries.

One-time session (ca 5 h) for pupils aged 9-12 providing in an attractive way (procreation of new life in a context of love) scientifically grounded information about the physical changes of puberty.

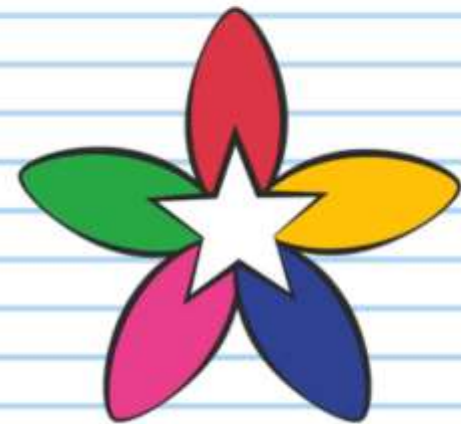
Parents participate in a previous information session (2h).

In Latvia the program for girls (The Cycle Show) has been implemented since 2015 in collaboration with Family ecology institute. 52 workshops have been delivered, involving 678 young adolescent girls and 470 adults (parents and teachers), who highly recommend the program. The implementation of the program for boys (Agents on a Mission) is planned on the Fall 2025

SE4FF:

Example 2

«TeenSTAR»



Sexuality
Teaching in the context of
Adult
Responsibility



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Top **holistic SE** programs (30+ countries)

«Beginning with the physical, the young persons can then **integrate** the intellectual, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of their personality and mature into a fully integrated human beings».

16 sessions in 4 blocks

PART 1: Aspects of human sexuality and personality

PART 2: The body and the gift of life

PART 3: Sexuality opens us up to another person

PART 4: The meaning and realization of marital love

Anatomy and physiology **separately** to boys and girls

Specific **optional religious** objectives

Study aim and research question



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Given the **dominance of the CSE approach** to SE in Latvia and the **necessity of SE4FF**, the objective of this research was to explore the compliance of the CSE approach to SE with SE4FF principles

Null hypothesis: CSE approach to SE does not comply with the conditions for providing SE4FF.

Research question: *To what extent the CSE approach to SE (as described in UNESCO guidelines) is coherent with SE4FF?*

Methodology



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Research process

1st step: to formulate clearly the basic principles of SE4FF based on scientific literature

2nd step: Based on SE4FF principles, to create a tool for the assessment of SE materials in Latvian language from the perspective of SE4FF.

3rd step: To explore the congruence of UNESCO's Guidelines with the principles of SE4FF, using the same assessment tool.



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Formulation of the SE4FF principles



Analysis and synthesis of recent research and educational programs related to SE4FF.

Research input

- **Spain:** Scientific publications of the research group “Infinity: Family, Love, and Sexuality” (University of Navarra)
- **Lithuania:** Scientific publications from the Research center on Marriage and Family in Vytautas Magnus university (Obeleniene, 2017, 2022)
- **Italy:** Scientific publications from the European Institute for Family Life Education
- ...

Educational input

- **Lithuania:** Programs “Health, Sexuality, and Family Life Education”
- **Italy:** “Love in life - affectivity and sexuality education pathways” guidelines
- **Germany:** “My Fertility Matters”
- **USA:** Program “TeenSTAR” (USA)

Research instrument

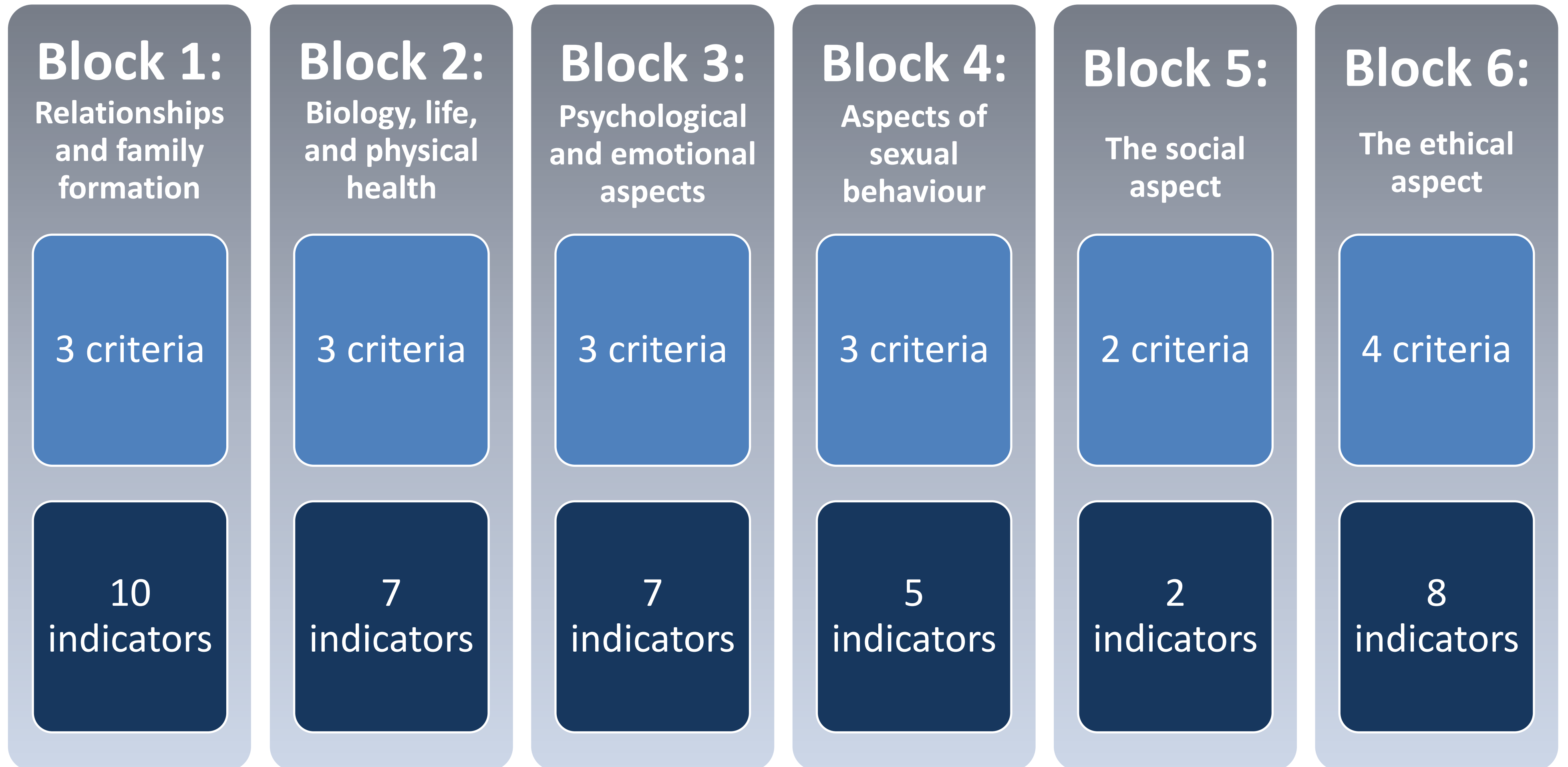


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A tool for document analysis was elaborated, which embedded SE4FF principles under six aspects / blocks:

- **Block 1: Relationships and family formation** (framework of love, to family formation values, parental involvement);
- **Block 2: Biology, life, and physical health** (stance on life, physical health);
- **Block 3: Psychological and emotional aspects** (gender awareness, sexual desire, psychological health risks);
- **Block 4: Aspects of sexual behaviour** (age of sexual relations, behavioural models);
- **Block 5: The social aspect** (gender roles);
- **Block 6: The ethical aspect** (acquisition of virtues, authenticity of body language).

Each analysis aspect / block includes 2 to 4 criteria. Each criterion includes 1 to 6 indicators. Each indicator can be assessed using a 3- to 5-level scale.



Block 1 – Family values



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FAMILY VALUES:

- ✓ complementarity of the two sexes (male and female)
- ✓ selfless love (mutual self-giving)
- ✓ social recognition in marriage (civil or religious)
- ✓ openness to life (fertility, childbearing and childrearing)
- ✓ stability (a permanent union for life)
- ✓ comprehensiveness (family as an holistic system)
- ✓ exclusivity (monogamy).

RATIONALE

Latvian historical heritage

Latvian Constitution

Research: Girgis et al., 2020; Benagiano et al, 2012; de Boer et al, 2012; Birnbaum & Reis, 2019; Bauman, 2008...



Block 6: The ethical aspect

Acquiring virtues	What is its notion on children and adolescents' ability to manage themselves and acquire virtues (including self-control and self-discipline)?
Personal growth (in freedom, responsibility, practical wisdom, fortitude, perseverance)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does it speak about education of freedom?• Does it speak about prudence (practical wisdom) for easier integration supervision of sex drive?• Does it speak about self-respect and courage - the ability to say "no"?• Does it encourage not to be discouraged by mistakes (side-steps), not to give in to self-growth, to choose to make better decisions in the future?
Relationship virtues	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does it talk about respect for others (not to be intimidating, respecting the other person's privacy, intimacy...)?• Does it talk about responsibility (informed, free mutual consent)?
Body language authenticity	Does it contain information about the authenticity of body language (the appropriateness of bodily actions to the type of relationship)?
Framework of well-being	What is its notion on the relationship between pleasure and well-being?

Reliability of the research instrument (39 indicators)


Used for assessing 72 educational materials in Latvian.

The reliability of the 39-item instrument was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The analysis indicated excellent internal consistency, $\alpha = .91$.



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Reliability Statistics



Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
,905	39

Exploration process of UNESCO guidelines

Exploration of UNESCO's guidelines with the help of the analysis tool was done in two steps.

Step 1 Two researchers individually read and evaluated UNESCO Guidelines chapter 5 “*Key Concepts, topics and learning objectives*”, using the *instrument*.

Step 2 Later, the researchers compared the results and resolved their differences in evaluation.



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Cohen's kappa (inter-rater reliability)



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Non weighted results: $\kappa = 0.26$

Weighted results

(Disagreements like "1 vs 2" are treated as less severe than "1 vs 4"):

Linear weights $\kappa = 0.28$

Quadratic weights $\kappa = 0.30$

Conclusion: "Fair agreement"

=> the two raters are consistent in their use of the 4-point scale

=> substantial room for improving rating reliability

**Decision = joint rating of each item
(discussion)**

Results



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The problem of ambiguity

Due to general nature of UNESCO guidelines various statements are ambiguous.

- It opens a possibility of multiple variations of interpretation.

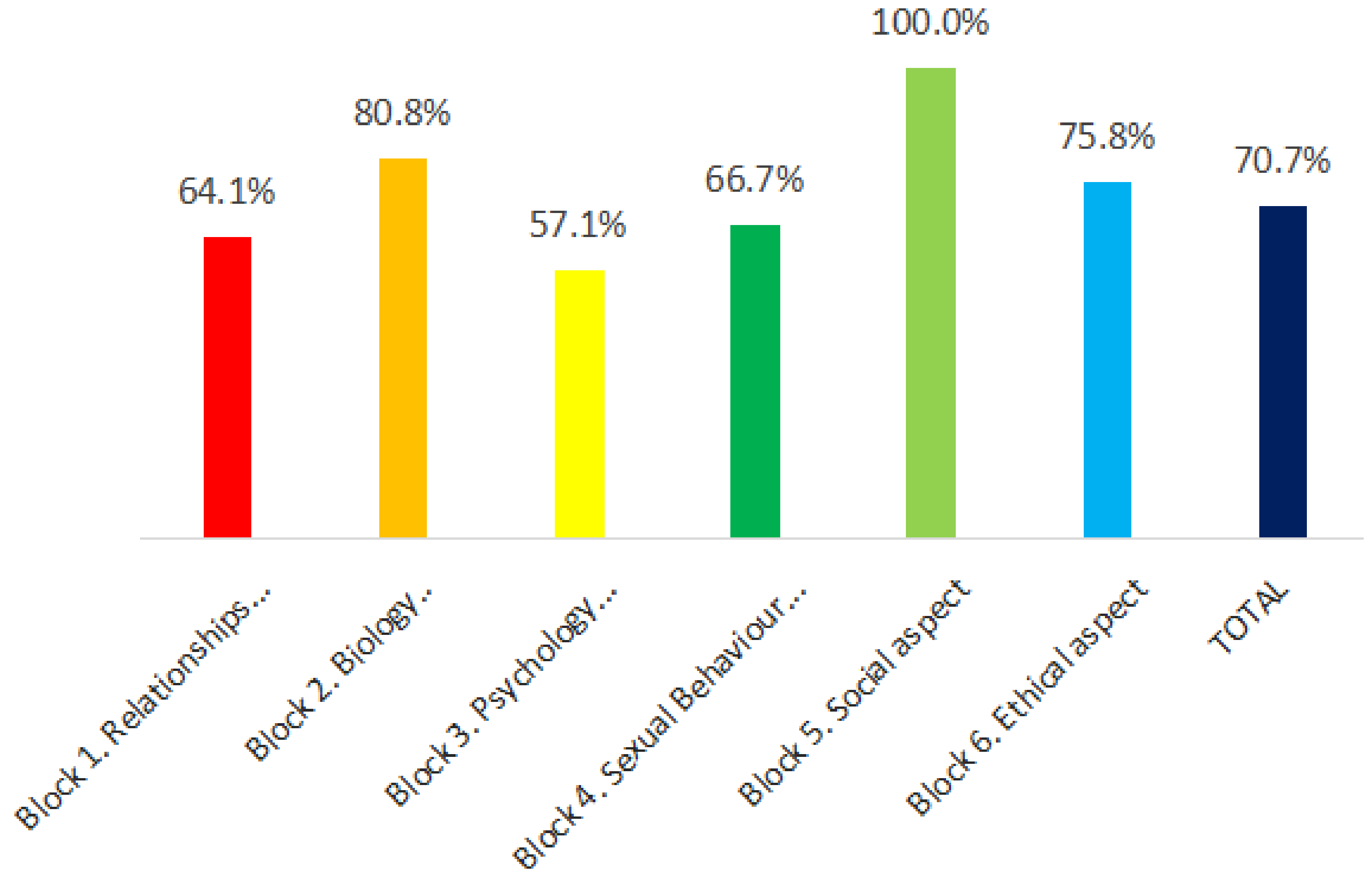
"Learning objectives (12-15 years) [...] Learners will be able to: [...] being knowledgeable and confident in deciding if, when and with whom to become sexually active..." (UNESCO, 2018, p. 71)



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UNESCO's "ITGSE" Exploration Results by Blocks

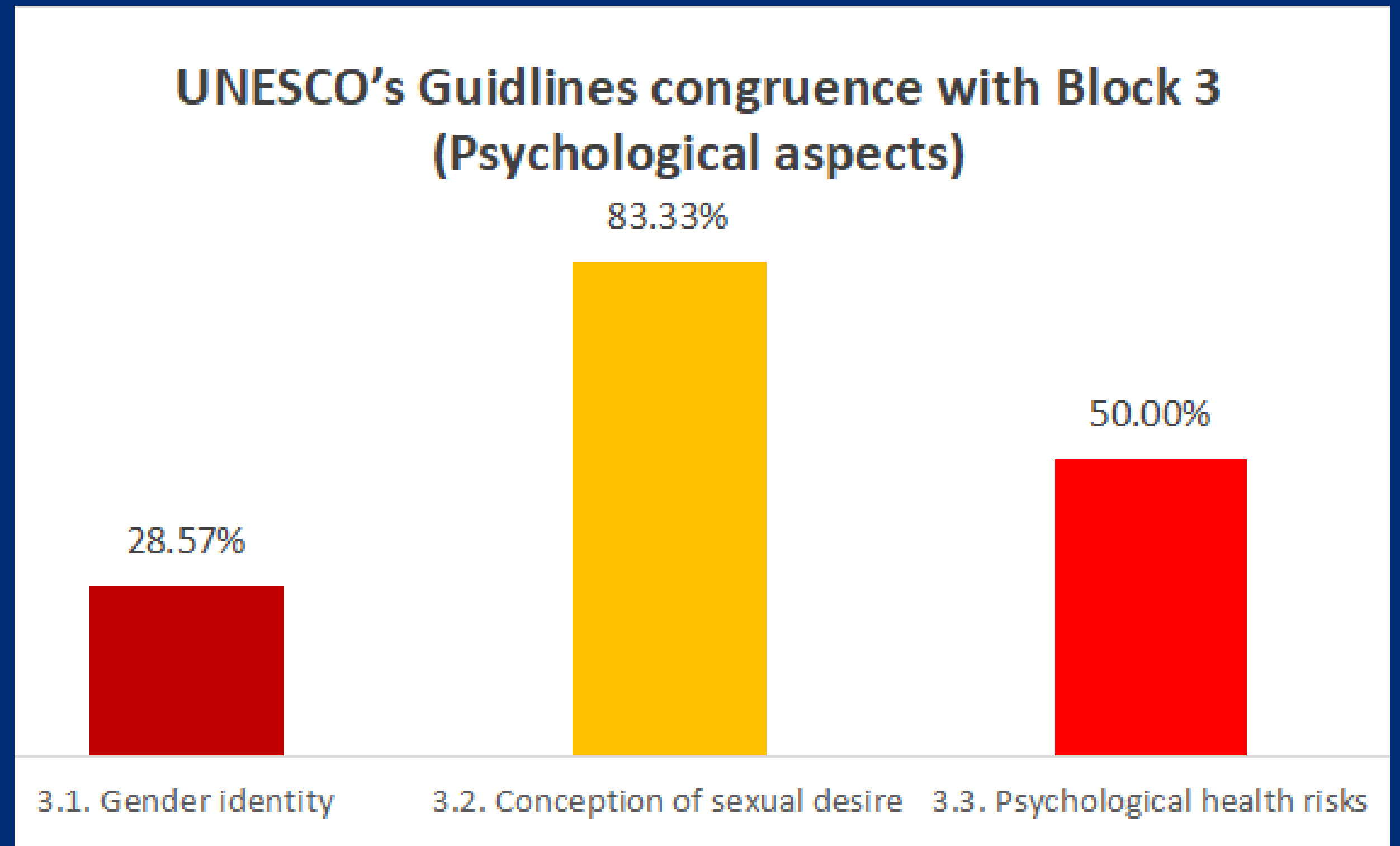
Overview:
What is the percentage of coherence of UNESCO guidelines with the central aspects of SE4FF?



Example of relevant differences between CES and the indicators of SE4FF



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Conclusions

CSE approach to SE only partially complies with the conditions for providing SE4FF. To reinforce democratic values in Latvia, the existent offer of SE should be diversified with new SE4FF provisions.

Further action in education:

- Targeted development of new resources based on SE4FF.
- Critical evaluation and revision of existing materials.

Further research:

- Provide empirical data incorporating teacher and parent perspectives in SE4FF
- Exploring the impact of SE4FF in practice



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THANK YOU!

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