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What happens under the duvet?

Teaching about sexual practices in Swedish secondary school

Auli Arvola Orlander & Sara Planting-Bergloo

"Less of everything else, more of what sex is!" fifteen-year-old Hilda declared in a student interview about her recent sexuality education unit. Although the interview also indicated that students found the teaching engaging, it was clear that something was missing. This study is part of a four-year research project exploring Swedish sexuality education in five secondary schools. In this paper, we focus on the teaching at one of the participating schools, where teachers chose to address the question of what sex might be. The study builds on the work of Annemarie Mol and her perspective on multiple realities. The aim is to investigate how sex might be enacted in Swedish secondary sexuality education. The study contributes with a patchwork of situated events from the teaching of sexual practices. This patchwork comprises student expectations, teacher planning, student participation, sexual role models, and the experiences of both students and teachers.

Keywords: sexuality education, sexual practices, secondary school, patchwork.

"We want to know how to have sex!", Peter stated in an interview discussing the sexuality education unit he and his fellow students had just completed. Although the interviews with him and his classmates revealed that they had found the teaching interesting, something was missing. They expected something more, something different to what they had experienced. Their lessons were part of a four-year research

Auli Arvola Orlander is an Associate Professor in Science Education at Stockholm University. E-mail: auli.arvola.orlander@su.se
Sara Planting-Bergloo has a PhD in Science Education at Stockholm University. E-mail: sara.planting-bergloo@su.se

project exploring Swedish school-based sexuality education in five secondary schools. In this study, we focus on one of the schools where teachers had decided to address students' questions about sex.[1] The aim is to investigate how the teaching of sexual practices might be enacted in Swedish secondary sexuality education.

A knowledge area in change but yet static

While the Swedish National Teaching of Students Organisation discussed many topics in January 1964, the most controversial was Proposal 99, where secondary school students demanded instruction in sexual intercourse techniques (Radio Sweden 2024). Although it has been a compulsory subject in Swedish secondary schools since 1955, sexuality education changed dramatically in 1964, when the student organisations raised their demands. Some of the original objectives have persisted. For example, there is still an emphasis on the health risks associated with sex (Centerwall 2005) and teaching which seeks to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unwanted pregnancies. However, over half a century later, students still seem to feel the same way about sexuality education as their grandparents did in 1964. Students still want to know what continues to be beyond the remit of school-based sexuality education: teaching about sex.

Although sexuality education is fairly uncontroversial in Sweden and its neighbouring countries, Belgium and the Netherlands, it is more contested elsewhere (Nordberg 2020, Aranda 2018, Ketting & Ivanova 2018, Roodsaz 2018, Zimmerman 2015). For example, in the United States and Canada, teaching can range from comprehensive to abstinence-only-based sexuality education, depending on the context and region (Maitland 2023, Hunt 2022, Lashof-Sullivan 2015, Fields 2008). However, although Sweden may appear progressive, sexuality education is not unproblematic (Cense 2018, Svendsen 2017). Contemporary political culture in Sweden and Europe is more polarised than ever before, a situation which is also reflected in schools (Larsson 2024). To avoid unmanageable conflicts between diverse groups of students, the easiest option often appears to be to avoid controversial issues in the classroom (Cassar et al. 2021).

In Sweden, both policy and instructive documents emphasise the need for sexuality education to balance between risk and health perspectives (National Agency for Education 2019, Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2018). Risk is the emphasis on disease and unwanted pregnancy. Health stresses the importance of relationships and affection. In a recent study we conducted of the approach to sexuality education

in secondary science classes, the teachers came to critically examine their emphasis on a risk perspective and felt challenged to adopt a new starting point in relationships, curiosity and imagination (Planting-Bergloo & Orlander Arvola 2024). However, the distinction between health and risk, also called pleasure and danger, approaches is not always clear-cut. Indeed, Vanessa Cameron-Lewis (2016) sees them as intertwined and interdependent. Louisa Allen (2020) concludes that most sexuality education adopts a risk perspective. The field of research endorses the value of teaching content related to physical pleasure, lust (McGreeney & Kehily 2016), and sensuality (Allen 2020). Elin Helbekkmo, Helene Trengereid Tempero, Ranghild Sollesnes and Eva Langeland (2021) call for education to become a source of positive information about sexual experiences for young people. Yet another perspective is that if schools cannot provide alternatives, students will learn about sex elsewhere, yet widely available, presence of online pornography (see e.g., Planting-Bergloo & Orlander Arvola 2022). Accordingly, risk once again becomes the central focus of sexuality education. Children and youth are presumed to be more susceptible to risks and therefore need to be taught on how to avoid them (Eleuteri et al. 2017). Adults are, on the contrary, understood as those who can make better judgments about risks (Quinlivan 2018, Lester & Russell 2014). With a dominant atmosphere of risk and danger within school sexuality education, the call to include pleasure and desire may at first appear progressive and liberating. However, too strong a focus on pleasure can also be problematic. Pleasure could, for example, come across as an ideal for students to achieve in their sexual lives and against which they are expected to evaluate themselves and their relationships. Physical pleasure can be too easily idealised (Allen 2012).

According to Allen (2021) (and many Swedish secondary school students), sexuality education is largely de-eroticised. Only a decade ago, Allen (2011, p. 133) argued that sexuality education is built on a "normative and cultural idea" that views young people as "non-sexual". However, although many secondary-level students might not yet be sexually active, most of them cannot be considered non-sexual. They are well aware of and curious about sexual practices (Allsop et al. 2023). Indeed, in meetings with various student groups, we have sensed their excitement about and anticipation of sexuality education. This is not surprising, studies show that students are interested in and have high expectations of school sexuality education (Helbekkmo et al. 2021).

In Sweden, the Schools Inspectorate (2018) and the Public Health Agency (2017) have emphasised the importance of involving students

in teaching to make it more relevant.[2] International research has concluded that sexuality education needs to engage young people's varying realities and challenges (Cense 2018, Aranda 2018). How to do this practically can take many different forms. In sexuality education, where the risk of embarrassment is high, encouraging students to post questions anonymously regarding the content they want to engage with may help schools to meet "specific social and identity goals" (Ellison et al. 2016, p. 10) and help young people avoid any perceived social expectations about sex.

What could "having sex" mean in teaching?

As other studies have shown, students are interested in teaching about sexual practices. In our research project, the students from the five participating schools were all interested in the topic. Hilda wanted to see "less of everything else" and "more about what sex is". Ahmed said that his teaching was mostly about consent, but that "all young people think more about sex than consent".

When Hannele Junkala, Maria Berge and Eva Silfver (2022) examined how having sex was portrayed in Swedish secondary school biology textbooks they discovered the (in)visibility of bodies and different sexual orientations and practices. Having sex was portrayed as synonymous with the intercourse that takes place between two people of the opposite sex. In particular, "penis-in-vagina penetration is the only sex act illustrated in detail, mostly with a male body on top of a female body" (Junkala et al. 2022, p. 532). Some of the biology teachers in our study confirmed that most of their students understood sex as penetration and discussed how this view could be challenged in their teaching (Planting-Bergloo & Orlander Arvola 2024).

The existing scholarship points to a tension between the reproductive and the sexual body in sexuality education. According to Allen (2021), sexuality education largely neglects sexual bodies. Australian scholars claim that sexuality education excludes discussions about sexual activity in favour of anatomy and biology (Shannon & Smith 2015). There has also been a call for scholars to prioritise the evaluation of the more positive aspects of sexuality education in their research (Ketting et al. 2016). Sexual bodies are, for example, evident in the Swedish curriculum—yet from a risk perspective. Thus, children and young people's bodies become something to be protected from the dangers of society, such as honour-based abuse or non-consensual sexual activity. For example, students are expected to critically review

pornographic material (National Agency of Education 2022), a subject which undoubtedly places the focus on sexual danger. The teaching materials often used in Swedish preschools and primary schools have been shown to embody sexuality in terms of danger. Anna Sparrman (2020, n.p.) concludes that adult "contemporary worries about the omnipresent paedophile limits the case for sexual citizenship for children" and instead advocates for a positive sexuality education where sexuality is discussed in terms of warmth, pride in one's body, and physical closeness.

The problems with the current teaching of sexuality education in Sweden cannot all be placed at the doors of the curriculum and its textbooks. Both teachers and students may find it inappropriate to discuss sexual practices or feel too embarrassed to talk about this kind of topic with students or peers (Allen 2011). Research also shows that teachers feel insecure managing discussions on sensitive and controversial topics and leave students very much on their own (Larsson 2024, Aranda 2018, Kello 2016, McAvoy & Hess 2013). Teachers find it easier to convey the "facts" about sexual risk. The complexity of discourses about "privacy", "shame", "guilt", "danger", and "pleasure" all make teaching sexuality difficult (Allen 2011, p. 21). If teachers feel talking about sex is an intrusion on the personal sphere it is likely to contribute to making sex an embarrassing and uncomfortable subject for them to teach (Ezer et al. 2022, Allen 2011).

Although there are examples of successful sexuality education in many schools, these seem too often to rely on the enthusiasm and knowledge of the individual teacher (Ezer et al. 2022). There are, however, notable exceptions. One English school examined in Sara Bragg et al. (2021) stands out for its clear focus on sexuality education, with the leadership prioritising counselling services, a scheduled timetable for students, anonymous question boxes, openness for everyone's different opinions and attention to staff wellbeing.

Teaching is more than a predefined content

For Sharon Todd (2016), the word education is now only about learning. Citing Biesta (2010), Todd (2016) means learning has been narrowed down to what we can measure and see through outputs, outcomes, and performances in school. Todd instead argues for a philosophical shift that sees education, not just "as a vehicle for skills management and training" (Todd 2016, p. 622), but as a process engaged with uncertainty and students' unpredictable experiences of becoming, not only becoming in the flesh but also in the unknown becoming of the

future. In this study, uncertainty plays a vital role in the teaching of sexuality education, particularly as it relates to "existential concerns and questions about living a life" (Allen 2021, p. 146). The idea of uncertainty evokes questions about the kinds of issues sexuality education should be teaching. Although Kathleen Quinlivan (2018) has concluded that it is pedagogically challenging to make sexuality education different, in line with Todd's conclusions (2016), there are obvious opportunities to dwell on the uncertain and unpredictable in Swedish sexuality education and become more open to alternative approaches.[3] Such a project, however, involves researchers, teachers, and students rethinking the teaching of sexuality.

Production of data on the teaching of sexual practices

The present study is part of a wider research project funded by the Swedish Research Council [2019-03962] on sexuality education in five secondary schools. Data were generated in creative meetings, so-called research circles, consisting of interdisciplinary teacher teams and five researchers. In each school, the teacher team included between five and thirteen teachers with a variety of subject competencies. This study builds on a collaboration with one of the schools. Five teachers and twenty-five 14–15-year-old students in year 8 gave their permission to be part of the project. All legal guardians were informed about the project, and those with a child under the age of 15 approved their involvement. The project was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority [ref. no. 2020-00823].

The collaboration with the participating year 8 teachers began at the start of the school year. The teachers indicated that they wanted to use the research circle meetings to plan for their upcoming sexuality education unit—the annual "week of love"—that would take place about a month and a half later. This thematic week has a long tradition at the school, and this time we in the research group joined in. However, in the circle discussions, the teachers problematised their approach to the "love" week and stressed the need to frame it differently in the future. A desire for a name change, for example, was raised primarily during discussions about how to teach pornography (see e.g. Planting-Bergloo & Orlander Arvola 2022). To our knowledge, organising a thematic week on sexuality education is quite common both in Swedish secondary schools and in Norway, where it has been promoted as "Week 6" by the organisation Sex og Politikk (Helbekkmo et al. 2021).

During the participating school's "week of love", all school subjects had to relate to sexuality education. In Swedish language, students read and wrote love poems, they were taught about contraceptives and reproduction in biology, and in physical education they discussed gendered norms in sports. Some topics were of more general, such as pornography, consent, and sexual practices. After discussions with team colleagues, Johan and Susanne, two teachers with subject competencies in the social sciences and English/physical education, agreed to take on the task of teaching the students about sexual practices. This initiative stemmed from a curiosity expressed by the teachers, which led to discussions between them and the researchers about what the Swedish and international research indicates students expect from sexuality education (see e.g., Allsop et al. 2023, Helbekkmo et al. 2021).

The data for the study, therefore, come from four 90-minute research circle meetings with teachers and researchers and from a 90-minute lesson with 25 year 8 students called "What is sex?". The teachers planned the lesson themselves, although our joint discussions generated both ideas and practical teaching suggestions. The data also include five semi-structured, approximately 30-minute-long group interviews with the 25 participating students, conducted at the end of the thematic week. Audio-recordings capturing the teaching of "What is sex?" were transcribed verbatim and used in the analysis. These different sources mean we can show a variety of examples, or "patches" from school practice.

Methodology: What could happen under the patchwork duvet?

The study is built primarily on the "co-existence of different realities" framework proposed by Annemarie Mol (2002, 2010, p. 264), which argues that there isn't a single reality but rather multiple, coexisting versions of reality. In an educational context, multiple realities are enacted in teaching within a national school system that is shaped by political agreements condensed into school policy documents. Different actors—teachers, students, researchers, and physical spaces like buildings—co-create realities. These multiple realities produce versions that differ from place to place (Law & Mol 1995, Mol 2002). When attempting to examine an educational practice, Mol's (2002) sociomaterial approach emphasises participation and engagement. As she points out, "methods are not a way of opening a window on the world, but a way of interfering with it" (Mol, 2002, p. 155).

The researcher is not a detached observer but is intertwined with the practice. This makes researchers active co-producers of school practice and producers of data (Gunnarsson 2018b).

Another foundation of the methodological framing in this study is relatedness. Phenomena such as sexuality education exist because of their relationships and the interdependencies these create. Actors are both enacted by their surroundings and afforded "to act by what is around them" (Mol 2010, p. 258). In the present study, teachers enact requests upon the students to engage in discussing sexual practices and the students, in turn, enact encounters with, for example, peers, materialities (e.g., post-it notes) and films. In so doing Mol's methodology is enacted; the result is the construction of multiple realities around the teaching about sex.

Our interest focuses on how school policy is used in teaching practice. We will tell stories—make patches—about situated events from teaching about sex in secondary school. These patches, however, represent only some of the multiple realities that exist around sexuality teaching, although they make partial connections between different events and sites (Law & Mol 1995). Part of our work is to pay attention to co-constitutive processes and examine possible outcomes produced in relation to participants and practice (Gunnarsson 2018a). As the term suggests, patches describe realities as bits of cloth with different patterns that can be sewn together in multiple ways with many different kinds of thread. The patchwork result is a variegated whole (Law & Mol 1995).

Paying attention to what situated events—patches—might produce, makes room for discussions of different outcomes. Mol (2002, p. 5) calls these "verbal openings that allow for other ways of thinking." Adopting this approach might further bring alive possibilities for philosophical ideas about unexpected future and uncertainty in events (Todd 2016), that exist in the events that make up sexuality education. In these events resides the paradox of how to teach secondary students about sexual practices.

Like a patchwork duvet, different realities are first connected in provisional ways. Together, multiplicity and patchwork offer a nuanced understanding of how different perspectives and practices coexist and are managed in different fields, such as, for example, schools. Multiplicity and patchwork shift the focus from seeking a unified truth to understanding how different perspectives are enacted and connected in practice. Using school practice as our starting point, we hope that the construction of our patchwork duvet provides a useful metaphor for discussing different perspectives and possible outcomes for teaching

about sex, even though we are well aware of sexual practices that take place in other spaces.
Our aim is to investigate how the teaching of sexual practices might be enacted in Swedish secondary sexuality education. The following two analytical questions have guided our work:

1. What patches of events might be enacted in teaching about sexual practices?
2. What possible outcomes might the patchwork produce?

How the patches about the teaching of "sex" were chosen also needs explaining. Our aim is not to tell *a* story but to present "bits and pieces" from the sexuality education practice of the class we studied (Law & Mol 1995, p. 276). Since it is the teaching about sexual practices that is in focus, the situated events that take place in sexuality education, central to patch choice has been their ability to illustrate the partial connections that teachers and students enact and to allow reflection on the meaning this might have for the practice of teaching and the challenges it might present.

In order to achieve these ends, the analysis of classroom events and research circle meetings about sex started with "tracing" (Gunnarsson & Bodén 2021, p. 81). This analysis brought to fore linked acts of the participating students and teachers. We traced situated events and produced patches of different activities, materials and procedures which provided a sense of the classroom activities in which we as researchers were intertwined as well as showing what was interesting to us as researchers in the teaching about sexual practices. This was done by reading, discussing, and re-reading transcribed recordings and notes (Gunnarsson & Bodén 2021).

A patchwork duvet about the teaching of sexual practices

Analysis of the data is presented here in the form of patches which recount different events and situations. Patches, when stitched together, provide hints about how the teaching of sexual practices might be enacted.

Patches of what students expect from sexuality education

As part of engaging the students in teaching at the beginning of the week, students were assigned the task of discussing and identifying

in groups what they wanted the teaching to include. They said that they wanted "to have discussions and watch films". The first patch concerns teachers' work of engaging students in the teaching. Students were allowed to write questions about what they wanted addressed. They posted questions anonymously, individually, and digitally before the thematic week started, which, following Ellison et.al (2016), is a method that can pave the way for the inclusion of more student voices. There was a wide range of expectations and curiosity. For example, "Venereal diseases, how do you get them and is there a cure?", "How do guys give birth?", "What is the meaning of life?", and "Anxiety, complexes, norms, why do they exist?". Questions related to sexual practices were:

- What is sex?
- What is it like to have sex for the first time?
- Why do you fuck?
- Should you stop sucking once he has come?
- How do you know if you want to have sex?
- Do you become "cool" once you have had sex?
- What is the most appreciated sex position?
- Why do you moan during sex?
- What do you do if there is a tense atmosphere during sex?
- When do you actually start having sex?
- What happens after sexual intercourse?

These questions reveal a range of student expectations and provide a variety of entrances for approaching sex in teaching. Although some of the questions have a heterosexual framing, many of them can also be seen as open to a variety of sexualities. It also seems that students expect there to be definite answers to their questions. For teachers, the list not only suggests different ways to approach sex in teaching, but it also acts as an inspiration when planning. However, the students' expectations of "right" answers also need to be considered within the teacher team. A decision needs to be taken on whether to give straightforward answers or whether to adopt a more explorative, open-ended and problematising approach, and when it is most appropriate to use each approach with the class.

In this particular example the school invited an external actor, the local youth centre, to meet with the class and address some of their questions.[4] A common approach in Swedish secondary schools, one of the aims is to make it easier for students to contact counsellors, get tested or obtain contraceptives on their own. Before the class, the list of questions was sent to the clinic staff, who then chose which ones to answer. They selected only the questions with straightforward

answers. For example, on whether or not men can give birth, the answer was a simple no. There were no uncertainties in their answers or openings offered, for example, for transgender perspectives. Allen (2020) has described this as reflecting an instrumental view of teaching. However, the thematic week also included more exploratory ways of teaching, such as small group discussions based on film screenings. While a list of questions may be an effective way for teachers to gain insight into students' preoccupations, does this approach lead to the false expectation that answers will be provided? To summarise, this patch actualises several outcomes about teaching sex: how to elicit topics that are of relevance to students, who should be providing the teaching, teachers or external professionals, and if the lessons should provide definitive answers or adopt a more exploratory approach. If, as Todd (2016) suggests, the future is unpredictable, is it at all desirable to give definite answers to questions of sexual practice?

Patches of planning the teaching of "What is sex?"

Moving from student expectations to teaching, this section presents patches that illustrate teachers' perspectives on how sex could become part of their teaching. The thought of teaching about sexual practices made the teacher team nervous, even though they had made the decision themselves. Would they be able to manage the content when teaching? To deal with their insecurity, Johan and Susanne chose to work together with the class. The five teachers in the team also jointly discussed and planned the lesson. Some of the thoughts Susanne brought to the fore were illustrative of other teachers' opinions in the research circle:

> I feel, as usual, when I have to teach a lesson about something where I am not completely comfortable and confident from the beginning, that I have to own this content. [...] It's more that I need to at least have some security in the planning, where it will lead. Now we're going to have discussions, the discussions can be about anything but that I kind of have an agenda. What I should hold on to, relate to.

A clear and planned structure makes Susanne feel confident in her teaching. She needs to own the content and have some sort of plan to follow. When a discussion could go in many different directions, she emphasises the need to have an agenda. Susanne and her teacher colleagues are not alone in their feelings. Although scholars stress the need for teaching to address pleasure, lust, and sensuality (Helbekkmo

et al. 2021, Allen 2020, McGreeney & Kehily 2016), the research (Aranda 2018, Kello 2016, McAvoy & Hess 2013) and the Swedish Schools Inspectorate (2022) shows that teachers are uncertain when addressing sensitive and controversial topics. Allen (2011) has further shown that both teachers and students feel embarrassed when discussing these kinds of topics. The teachers' response in this case was to plan and create a sense of control. But how can a lesson be planned that is open for a variety of pathways? This desire for certainty creates an interesting tension with the value that Todd (2016, p. 622) places on welcoming uncertainty as a way of, first, counteracting "skills management and training" in teaching and learning, and second, accommodating students' unpredictable experiences of becoming. To summarise the possible outcomes from this patch for teaching sex, the planning of sexuality education actualises how teachers can enact their teaching despite their uncomfortable feelings. Their solutions were to work together, have a plan and yet be flexible enough to respond to and build on student discussion.

Patches of student participation

This patch is drawn from the actual teaching of the "What is sex?" lesson. At the beginning of the lesson, each student was asked to write down on a post-it note what they recognised as sex. They were then assigned the task of working together in smaller groups, where they read their answers aloud and sorted the notes according to their answers. The excerpts are from two of these student groups:

> Group 1:
>
> Lucas: Sex is a human's way of creating new people.
>
> Anna: It's exactly the same as mine. Should we put them in the same place?
>
> [...]
>
> Tilda: Love and pleasure.
>
> Joel: There are different types of sex.
>
> Cornelia: When you feel pleasure. Sex can be both love and pleasure. It is a chemical reaction.

> Group 2:
>
> Sonya: The norm involves two people, a boy and a girl.
>
> Elvira: People who are together are in bed having intercourse. It starts with being sexually excited and ends with both being satisfied, I guess.

When students' realities are made part of the teaching (see e.g., Cense 2018), unexpected possibilities are created. The notes and the discussions around them included the student's understandings of sex as reproduction, love, pleasure, norms, satisfaction, positions, locations, partners, chemical reactions, excitement, and assumptions. The student discussions reflect the full spectrum of what sex might be. It is biological reproduction, but it is also a pleasure. The teaching practice in this classroom challenged the notion that sexuality education is often about reproductive bodies (Allen 2021). Here, the teachers focused on the sexual body and the students were allowed to acknowledge that sex can be a mixture of love, pleasure, and reproduction. The teaching showed that the students tend to affirm heterosexual norms but are aware, if not fully certain, of the role of arousal followed by satisfaction. These attitudes can be attributed in part to the focus on reproduction in Swedish biology textbooks (Junkala et al. 2022). However, despite this emphasis on the reproductive or scientific body, the students also talked about the sexual body, a perspective which, according to Allen (2021), is often missing from school sexuality education.

After some time, Susanne and Johan collected the notes. After a quick review, Susanne read a few of them out loud and then sought confirmation from the whole group:

> "The word sex means that we enjoy ourselves in a sexual way. We humans are turned on and like different things. There are many different ways to have sex, either alone or with others." Do you feel that this reflects somehow what you have written in your notes? [students murmur in agreement]

In her summary, Susanne chose to emphasise lust and enjoyment (see e.g. Helbekkmo et al. 2021, McGreeney & Kehily 2016). She pointed out that there are a variety of ways to have sex, both by yourself and with others. She disregarded reproduction and implicitly tried to challenge heterosexuality by emphasising a variety of sexual practices. Both Susanne and Johan were aware that reproduction had been covered earlier by the biology teacher. When responding to the

expression of student views, teachers can choose to acknowledge certain contributions and not others. In neither the students' discussions nor the teachers' summary was the risk perspective mentioned, even though research shows it is usually pervasive in sexuality education (Planting-Bergloo & Orlander Arvola 2024, Allen 2020). However, although they acknowledged the students' interest in sex and pleasure, the teachers did not elaborate. Here we can discern how teachers did not fully engage in the discussion and still left much by way of explanation up to the students. According to Larsson (2024), teachers' insecurity may cause them to avoid certain classroom discussions.

Another way the students were engaged in the teaching was through the use of Mentimeter, a web-based tool for anonymously answering questions with cell phones. The students were presented with the following questions:

- What do you think is the "classic" way of getting laid?
- Which people have sex with each other?
- What exactly do they do?
- How does sex start and end?

Several suggestions rolled up and disappeared rapidly on the screen in front of the class, which made it difficult for the researchers to take notes. However, we noticed that the students' answers were similar to those presented earlier on the post-it notes. With the screen, the students could read how others had responded to the questions. But the teachers did not comment on the task or follow up on it later in the lesson, although there were many opportunities to explore the students' responses further. The teachers were caught up in with their agenda and keeping control of the lesson's timing and structure. The difficulty the teachers had with the topic made it difficult for them to embrace exploratory teaching and to surmount the challenge, as Quinlivan (2018) calls it, of making sexuality education different. To summarise the outcomes for teaching sex, teachers did not become involved in discussions with students. Despite their discomfort, small group discussions, anonymous surveys and short reflections allowed student participation without compelling them to talk and facilitated the expression of different views and perspectives on sexuality and sexual practice.

Patches of providing role models in teaching about sex

In another classroom activity, the teachers showed parts of three films on the topic of sex. The film clips were chosen by the teachers to provide

different examples of sexual practices. The patches describe the clip and the act of its screening in the classroom context.

The first clip was taken from the film *Sex on the Map* (2012), produced by the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) and the Swedish Broadcasting Company (UR). An animated film in which an adult asks a group of adolescents about sex, it has been described as sex-positive, age-appropriate and inclusive but also compared to a porn movie (Planting-Bergloo & Orlander Arvola 2024). In other words, it contains quite explicit, although animated, images of sex. In contrast to the previous patches, the content and spirit of *Sex on the Map*, rather than providing students with definite answers about sex, can be seen as adopting a more open-ended and exploratory approach. From the teachers' point of view, the viewing was intended to emphasise a variety of sexual practices. Susanne made this point explicit when the clip came to an end and she said to the group: "We just wanted to give you the big picture."

The second clip was taken from *Normal People* (Guiney et al. 2020), a television miniseries based on the book by Sally Rooney. In this scene, the series' two protagonists, two young adults, a woman and a man, are about to have sexual intercourse. Susanne introduces the film by saying: "We want to highlight something we think is important: How these two people meet each other carefully and harmoniously". Before the scene that the teachers think could be regarded as inappropriate for classroom viewing, Susanne and Johan stop the film:

> Susanne: We'll stop now before it gets too exciting!
>
> Gustav: Please, don't stop!

This film screening gave students a picture of how sex could be enacted. Even before the film was shown, Susanne emphasised the importance of sex being carried out "carefully" and in harmony, a statement that reflects prevailing social debates to which we will return later. Gustav, however, sought to resist the teachers' decision to end the film before it became too explicit. He was eager to see more, even though the teachers were concerned about the question of appropriate visual content, and had discussed it at length within the research circle. Afterwards, when Susanne asked the students what was going on in the clip, only two of them were willing to share their opinions. One of them thought the sexual situation "looks stiff" while the other thought the characters seem to "care about each other". This latter response shows that the intended message had been conveyed.

A third film clip was used to provide another angle on sex in teaching. *Tea and Consent* by Blue Seat Studios[5] (Fatta Man 2015) with a Swedish translation is, to our knowledge, widely used in Swedish classrooms and in the UK (see e.g. Bragg et al. 2021). The teachers saw the film as an opportunity to initiate the topic of consent. After the screening, the students were instructed to discuss this question in pairs: "How do you know if you want sex?" The teachers then invited the students to think more generally about this topic, not only about sexual situations, with the help of the following questions:

> Imagine that someone asks you to do something that you really want to do. How does your body feel? What body movements come to you spontaneously?
>
> Imagine that someone asks you to do something that you really don't want to do. How does your body feel? What body movements come to you spontaneously?

The inclusion of consent in sexuality education is a result of both contemporary social debates and the adoption in 2018 of a new Swedish law on consent. Although sexual consent was the starting point, the teachers broadened the discussions with students to include feelings and movements related to situations of safety and insecurity in general. Examples of student answers were:

> Sofie: You smile, or you can smile with your whole body, but you can't really explain what it looks like.
>
> Iris: Oh, but that's because if you're reluctant and uncomfortable then you really don't want to.

Sofie describes her physical reaction to the feeling of desire as being able to "smile with your whole body", but finds it hard to "explain what it looks like". Iris uses the words "reluctant" and "uncomfortable" to describe her lack of desire, but she, too, struggles to define it further. These discussions suggest that students do not find it difficult to acknowledge their own bodily feelings but find it hard to describe them to others. Hence, encouraging students to become aware of how their bodily feelings may be expressed and then think about how these could be communicated to others, either verbally or nonverbally, might be a way of addressing consent in teaching. To summarise the outcomes that these patches actualise for the teaching of sexual practices, films and other resources need to be identified that are both suitable for showing in a classroom while acknowledging students' interest in

seeing more about sex. By being willing to show students visual sexual content, the teachers regard them not as "non-sexual" (see e.g. Allen 2011), but as explicitly sexual beings. As many of the patches from the classroom practices have shown, engaging students in teaching and not forcing them to share their views in front of the whole class can be a challenge. Posting answers anonymously and discussing in smaller groups works well whereas commenting in a whole group scenario on a graphic film clip was considerably less successful.

Patches of student and teacher experiences of teaching about sex

The final patch summarises student opinion on the teaching they experienced and stems from group interviews that were held in parallel with the end of the "week of love". The students had different views about sexuality education being based on discussions. A few of them said:

> Lina: We had to discuss it sometimes. Then it is easier to understand and summarise.
>
> Amanda: The lessons were fun… where you had to discuss.
>
> Tove: So if it's love week, this week, then I'd rather be taught than discuss, or it's fun to discuss too but not the entire lesson.

Lina and Amanda liked the discussions and said it made sexuality education easier to understand, while Tove found it to be too much and wanted to be taught instead. As described earlier, the teachers' decision to engage students in discussions was based on their teaching preferences. Studies have shown that involving students in their teaching makes it more relevant to them (Cense 2018, Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2018, Public Health Agency 2017). However, a sense of wanting to "be taught" in a more traditional way might be expressed here because, as we have discussed earlier, there was a lack of teacher involvement in the discussions (Larsson 2024, Aranda 2018, Kello 2016, McAvoy & Hess 2013) or because the students had expectations of being taught in a certain way (see e.g., Todd 2016).

During the interviews, other experiences of the teaching also emerged. In one discussion between five students talking about their sex lesson:

> Axel: What is sex? It's really all about sex and cohabitation that you have to learn about, but still that lesson was, like, very short.
>
> Noah: Just an hour, like.

One of the students was a bit more specific about what content could have been included:

> Smilla: Well, I kind of thought it could have been a little more about sex, like what happens afterwards, or for how long you have [sexual intercourse] … (laughter). About, like, what happens.

Others chipped in about the lesson in a positive way:

> Erik: I think these sex things will really be remembered.
>
> Interviewer: "What is sex?" What happened there?
>
> Erik: Yes.

These comments indicate that the students were, in general, pleased with the lesson about sexual practices. They found it to be rather short and not explicit enough. They wanted to know practical details, like the possible duration of sex and what happens afterwards. But they did find the lesson memorable. The attempt to view them, not as non-sexual but rather as young people interested in sex (see e.g. Allen 2011) seems to have been successful.

As one of the teachers, Susanne described being exhausted afterwards but satisfied nonetheless with how the lesson had gone. What she and the other teachers had hoped for was that the lesson would have an impact on the students and that they would continue to discuss its content with each other. To summarise the outcomes of these patches, actualise for the teaching of sex, there are significant challenges in meeting the expectations and wishes of different students, especially regarding the number and extent of classroom discussion. That the students still had basic questions about sex even after the week of love was over shows how hard it is to answer students' questions and promote their understanding of a sensitive sexual encounter. Regardless of their different wishes, most students seemed to be quite satisfied with the teaching.

Discussing patchworks on education about sex

We have aimed to investigate how the teaching of sexual practices might be enacted in Swedish secondary sexuality education. This was done by analysing what possible outcomes patches of events might produce for the teaching of sex. One overall outcome is that teaching about sexual practices is a challenging task for teachers. This may explain why only one of the five teacher teams participating in our wider research project expressed an interest in addressing this topic. Specifically, this school aimed to approach sexuality education differently (see e.g. Allen 2021, 2020, Quinlivan 2018) and to focus on students' specific interest in sexual practices (Helbekkmo et al. 2021, Aranda et al. 2018, Pound et al. 2016). The importance of teaching about sexual practice in school has been part of public discourse for some time (Radio Sweden 2024).

While researchers can portray situations, or in our case, produce patches, they cannot stipulate the right way of doing things. Although we highlight specific situations and raise possible outcomes, it is up to individual teachers to create new ways of teaching by critically examining, reconsidering, and rethinking the norms and processes within sexuality education. In line with Allen (2020, 2021), both educators and researchers must challenge existing knowledge and practices.

In our investigation, Mol's (2010) framework of multiple realities and patchworks provided a foundation for the analytical process to engage with what teaching about sex might entail. Data generated in a variety of teaching situations provided some idea of how sexual practices could become part of the regular sexuality education curriculum. In our analysis, the student and teacher experiences we grappled with were enacted as the patches of student expectations, teacher planning, student participation, sexual role models and student and teacher experiences.

Students were given opportunities to think about and discuss questions related to sex (both alone and in groups) that had been planned by their teachers. However, planning for teaching should not prevent the acknowledgement of unexpected openings and the possibility of moving outwards from students' interests and concerns. Quinlivan (2018) argues that for sexuality education to be relevant, teachers need to improvise. They need to take advantage of the situations that arise, to see them as creative possibilities and opportunities for experimentation, even though it is a demanding undertaking. As Todd (2016) points out, uncertainty can be of value in teaching. As far as the teachers in this study are concerned, they have taken their first steps in teaching about sex. In the joint process of planning and

realisation, Susanne and her colleagues may have gained a sense of ownership, which may in turn help them to take on the same or related topics in the future. Hence, these teachers may well continue on their explorative pathway, addressing their hesitations and letting students' interests take the lead (Cense 2018, Aranda 2018).

Such an approach presents an opportunity for teachers to disengage from discourses of schooling and specific learning outcomes (Todd 2016). Our investigation points towards the possibility of combining an explorative and student-driven teaching approach with lecturing. The student interviews revealed a desire for both ways of teaching. As a teacher, getting involved in student-driven discussions and work (see e.g Larsson 2024) makes it possible for small groups to work in depth with topics of interest for a longer period of time.

In our study, student engagement was largely defined by the posting of notes and group discussions. In front of the whole class, students' views were presented anonymously via digital tools or post-it notes summarised by the teachers. These choices might signal cautiousness because the teachers did not want to direct attention towards specific students. Anonymous posting could also have ensured that students talked more, something Ellison et al. (2016) advocate. Few student voices were heard in whole-class situations, but in the group work almost all students talked.

During the lesson, both teachers and students mostly presented sex as something enjoyable and positive (see e.g. Helbekkmo et al. 2021, McGreeney & Kehily 2016). The sexual body was made present and acknowledged (see e.g. Allen 2021, 2011, Sparrman 2020). However, when the topic of consent was introduced, the teaching moved to consider the issue of sexual risk, such as sexual assault.

Teaching about sex without mentioning consent is practically impossible in the contemporary Swedish classroom. In 2018, a new law on consent was passed, and in 2022, the school subject sexuality education changed its name to "Sexuality, consent and relations" (National Agency of Education 2022). However, although risk-oriented perspectives ought to always be part of sexuality education, this study shows the equal importance of teaching that is more oriented to engaging with the topic of pleasure (Planting-Bergloo & Orlander Arvola 2024, Allen 2020, Cameron-Lewis 2016, McGreeney & Kehily 2016). A focus on pleasure would fulfil students' desire to know more about sexual practices. According to Allen (2021), the absence of teaching about sexual practices can be seen as reflecting a de-eroticised sexuality education. To some extent, at least, this conclusion no longer applies to the students participating in this study.

Even though the teachers felt insecure, they took on a subject area their students had asked for. They were willing to open themselves up for a teaching experience of unpredictable moments and insecure elements, a fertile ground for rethinking sexuality education. These early efforts might be the beginning of a longer journey towards more varied and exploratory teaching practices and away from the dominating school discourses related to assessment and predetermined answers.

Noter

1. In this paper the word sex refers to the act of sexual practice.
2. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate is a governmental agency working to ensure that all school students are provided with good quality and equal education in a safe environment.
3. Quinlivan (2018) provides several "traditional" discourses in sexuality education, such as the concern with reproduction, that adults know what young people need, and that teachers are experts.
4. The youth centre is for young people aged 12 to 23. They offer for example advice on contraception, discuss thoughts about body and sexuality, depression and relationships.
5. The film has been translated into Swedish with permission from Blue Seat Studios.

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