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Normalising Non-Normativity?

An interview study on non-normative and normative discourses in upper
secondary school sex education

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Abstract

In this study five upper-secondary school teachers have been interviewed on their methods for teaching on and integrating aspects of sex education in their respective subjects. The aim has been to examine how participants relate to norm-critical aspects that are part of the general syllabus and guidelines on teaching sex education as well as how their methods relate to non-normative and anti-oppressive pedagogical theories. To analyse the data I have used feminist critical discourse analysis alongside the framework of the aforementioned pedagogical theories. The results of the analysis show that gender and sexuality is a highly prevalent topic for the participants when using norm-critical perspectives, yet bears different connotations for different teachers. Varying approaches to non-normative and anti-oppressive pedagogy are used by the participants. The findings in this study indicate a shift towards an increasing normalisation of non-normative discourses in upper-secondary schools sex education.

Key Words

Sex Education - Critical Pedagogy - Non-Normativity - Discourse

Nyckelord

Sexualundervisning - Kritisk Pedagogik - Icke-Normativitet - Diskurs

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1. Introduction

In January 2021 Skolverket (Swedish National Agency for Education) and the Swedish Ministry of Education approved a new general curriculum for upper secondary education, the contents of which are to be implemented in the autumn semester of 2022. Many of the new regulations touch on aspects relevant to the curriculum for sex education such as counteracting gender roles that can be perceived as limiting to students. The alterations were given attention, both critical and celebratory, in media and among organisations for raising topics such as consent, relationships, gender-identity and norms that had previously not been included as extensively.¹

Texts such as general syllabi have historically been reflective of the values and concerns of the times they have been implemented in. This new formulation of the syllabus states its intent for students to develop a critical disposition towards power structures and the portrayal of relationships and sexuality in various contexts. Just as previous regulations have been reflective of the kinds of concerns adults had for youths at the time, be it the consequences of sex outside of wedlock or the perceived corruptive influences of jazz culture², the most recent changes in the general syllabus contain a particular mentioning of consent, honor-culture and pornography.³ Both within this new general curriculum and in texts such as *Skolverkets* guidelines for teaching sex education one can see that principles that originate in critical pedagogical theory such as anti-oppressive education and non-normative pedagogy are included in several sections. The contents of such texts are a product of ideas that are sufficiently acceptable to be included by national institutions such as upper-secondary education. To understand the reasons why the 2021 regulations have the current contents, it is necessary to look at the elements that have characterized previous regulations. Sex education in Sweden has long been characterized as ahead of its time. Since the mandatory implementation of sex education in 1956,⁴ the general syllabus has been through a multitude of changes that have been reflective of the values and concerns of the times in which they have been implemented. The guidelines for sex education in

¹ Skolverket (2021) *Förordning om ändring i förordningen (SKOLFS 2011:144) om läroplan för gymnasieskolan, SKOLFS 2021:9* pg.4

² Skolverket (2013), *Sex- och samlevnadsundervisning i gymnasieskolan*, Danagårds Litho, pg.10

³ Skolverket (2021) *Förordning om ändring i förordningen (SKOLFS 2011:144) om läroplan för gymnasieskolan, SKOLFS 2021:9* pg.4

⁴ Skolverket (2013), *Sex- och samlevnadsundervisning i gymnasieskolan*, Danagårds Litho, pg.10

Sweden has been on a decades long journey from the abstinence centered and highly moralising first guidelines from 1945, to 1977s introduction of the concept “samlevnad” which directly translates to coexistence, expanding the notion that issues related to sexuality were limited to marriage.⁵ Influenced by non-normative pedagogical theory and queer theory used in research and activism starting in the early 2000s, changes in the Act Prohibiting Discrimination and Other Degrading Treatment of Children and Pupils⁶ were made, adding sexual orientation as a cause for discrimination.⁷ Since 2011, additions have been made to school policy texts and guidelines emphasising how sex education should be integrated into several of the mandatory subjects in upper-secondary education, as well as the use of concepts such as normativity and identity to broaden the scope of what can be included in a comprehensive sex education.⁸ It is within this context that the participating teachers in this study operate when teaching sex education. In this study I use the term sex education to refer to all aspects within the teachers respective curriculims that pertain to educating on sexual health, reproduction, gender and sexual identity as they are relevant to their school subjects.

As non-normativity becomes increasingly normalised through state legislation, it befalls teachers to put these concepts into practice where their respective subjects require them. This study analyses the accounts from interviews with five upper secondary teachers in Sweden on their experiences of navigating a use of norm-critical discourse in topics of sex education. In this study I interview five upper-secondary school teachers of various subjects on their relationship to teaching sex education, how they relate to the norm-critical aspects of *Skolverkets*’ guidelines and non-normative aspects of their teaching. The analysis of this study is built on the context of the upcoming new general syllabus and the non-normative contents of *Skolverkets*’ support material as well as the critical pedagogical theories anti-oppressive education and non-normative pedagogy.

⁵ Skolverket (2013), *Sex- och samlevnadsundervisning i gymnasieskolan*, Danagårds Litho, pgs. 9-12

⁶ SFS 2006:67 *Lag om förbud mot diskriminering och annan kränkande behandling av barn och elever*. Stockholm: Utbildningsdepartementet

⁷ Bromseth, Janne & Lotta Björkman (red.) (2019): *Normkritisk pedagogik – Perspektiv, utmaningar och möjligheter*. Studentlitteratur: Lund. pg.41

⁸ Ibid. pg.77

1.1 Aims & Research Question

The purpose of this study is to analyse discourses and subsequent teaching methods engaged by upper-secondary school teachers in sex education.

The questions that this study aims to answer are the following:

- How do the teachers use the norm-critical regulations and guidelines from *Skolverket* when teaching sex education in their respective subjects?
- (How) do the participants relate to non-normative/anti-oppressive pedagogical theory in their own practice of teaching sex education?

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this analysis is informed by postmodern epistemology as well as Raewyn Connell's and Rebecca Pearse's theory on the reproductive arena. The meso-theories are non-normative pedagogy and anti-oppressive education both of which are rooted in the tradition of critical pedagogy while non-normative pedagogy is also founded on queer theory.

2.1. Postmodern/post-structuralist epistemology

Postmodernism developed as a response to modernist theories of universality and narratives of inevitable progression. Instead, postmodernist thought lies in language and discourse as facets that construct what is and is not real, and that, as language and discourse varies throughout different contexts, there is no singular and objective interpretation of reality.⁹ In postmodernism it is the hegemonic, meaning those with the most influence and status of objectivity, discourse that is the controlling force that determines what is and isn't normative. It is the power that hegemony bears that dictates what is perceived as knowledge. As this pertains to postmodern feminism, discourses on gender and sexuality are interpreted alongside nuances of other social identities such as race, ethnicity and class. This does not however result in fixed realities dependent on different social identities. Rather, the ever changing nature of discourses that

⁹ Jagger, Alison M. (red.) (2013). *Just methods: an interdisciplinary feminist reader*. Second edition. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers. pg.343

construct social identities mean that one can not claim that there is an inherent character or set of interests belonging to any social group.

Post-structuralism belongs to the postmodern tradition of ideas. Post-structuralist perspectives are central to both non-normative pedagogy and anti-oppressive education as it pertains to how language creates conceptions of power and meaning within discourse.¹⁰ The presence of postmodernist and post-structuralist theory in my own study stands true to the non-normative pedagogical theory that meaning is always deferred and that no account of reality is ever complete and that as norms, while they may change, still have the ability to be oppressive and thus must always be viewed critically. While there is framework in place for the pedagogy and curriculum of sex education, it should be seen, according to aforementioned theory, that the truth claims it holds are relative to the specific discourses that produced it.¹¹ It is for these reasons that accounts of reality based upon a subjective position can not be comprehended as universal for any specific group, the concept of a unanimous subject is false while understandings of the self in relation to one's social positioning are influenced by society, it is the varying surrounding discourses that can affect our actions.¹² Systems and patterns of oppression, established on conceptions of social groups and identities are informed by discourse and this can still be said to be a shared experience among marginalised groups. These actions result in affecting our surroundings in such a way that they reproduce and create discourse anew.

2.2 Gender and the Reproductive Arena

In *Gender in World Perspective*, Raewyn Connell and Rebecca Pearse present the concept of the reproductive arena as a way of conceiving of gender and its relation to both body and society. This pertains to the process called social embodiment, meaning that the materiality of the body is significant both by being an object and an agent in social practice. In relation to gender, this culminates in what Connell and Pearse call the reproductive arena constituted by both the “bodies’ own capacities and the practices that realize them” where amongst other things the

¹⁰Bromseth, Janne & Lotta Björkman (red.) (2019): *Normkritisk pedagogik – Perspektiv, utmaningar och möjligheter*. Studentlitteratur: Lund. pgs.45-48

¹¹ Jagger, Alison M. (red.) (2013). *Just methods: an interdisciplinary feminist reader*. Second edition. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers. pgs.343-344

¹² Bromseth, Janne & Lotta Björkman (red.) (2019): *Normkritisk pedagogik – Perspektiv, utmaningar och möjligheter*. Studentlitteratur: Lund. pg. 45

creation of “women” and “men” take place.¹³ Connell and Pearse are clear that this does not mean that different reproductive capacities are a sole cause of gendered practices. In fact most gendered practices are not at all logically linked to sexual reproduction. However there is a significant area of social life, which Connell and Pearse call the gender domain that is socially linked to the reproductive arena.¹⁴

This bears significance not least to natural science teachers’ discourses in sex education. Biological and reproductive qualities are central in several aspects of the curriculum, yet the reality of gender, being comprised of more than biological and reproductive qualities necessitates a much broader discussion. One that can be facilitated by teachers in order to counteract a harmful understanding of gender being solely derivative of biology for their pupils.

2.3 Pedagogical Theories

Both of the theories that I have chosen to base my analysis upon are rooted in the tradition of critical pedagogy. The two primary theories that I have chosen to analyse my material are anti-oppressive education and non-normative pedagogy. While anti-oppressive education is informed by Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, non-normative pedagogy is influenced by the former and has its roots in queer theory. Critical pedagogy has international roots, most notably with the Brazilian theorist Paulo Freire who, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, wrote on a theory of education that would strive for the liberation of oppressed peoples through both defining how oppression is perpetuated and formulating ways to work against it concretely through the means of education.¹⁵

2.3.1 Anti-Oppressive Education

Anti-Oppressive education is an approach within critical pedagogy that addresses and counteracts the ways in which forms of oppression are reproduced in education through the factual, practical and discursive contents of the tuition. By factual contents I mean the actual “knowledge” taught, that educators and school policy makers deem necessary for pupils to be required to learn. By practical contents I refer to the way in which pupils are expected to acquire their knowledge through styles of tuition, the way they are expected to demonstrate their

¹³ Connell, Raewyn, & Pearse, Rebecca (2002, 2016) *Gender; In World Perspective*. Third edition. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. pgs. 48-49

¹⁴ Ibid. pgs.50-51

¹⁵ Freire, Paulo (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, England: Clays Ltd. pgs. 20-44

knowledge and the criteria by which their work is evaluated. With discursive contents I mean the more implicit messages conveyed to pupils by the school as an institution regarding what knowledge and demonstrations thereof are academically legitimate.

In the seminal article *Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*, Kevin Kumashiro declares that the two projects of anti-oppressive educational research are “understanding the dynamics of oppression and articulating ways to work against it”.¹⁶ The purpose of Kumashiro's article is to summarise the various analyses of the causes and forms of oppression in education as well as the measures that could change it. To do so Kumashiro formulates four ways of conceptualising and working against oppression. Inspired by the academic works of other educators and researchers he also adds that a post-structuralist perspective is necessary to address the multifacetedness of the issue.¹⁷ The four ways that Kumashiro summarises are the following: Education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and Othering and education that changes students and society.

The terms Other and Othering refer to groups that are marginalised in society, namely that they are other than the norm. Groups that can be classified as Other include people of color, people who are trans or who otherwise transgress gender norms and expectations, people with low socioeconomic statuses, people with disabilities as well as people who have limited proficiency in the language or have different cultural and or religious backgrounds than that of the society they live in.¹⁸ By presenting certain groups and identities as the norm in an educational setting, those who do not belong to those groups are essentially automatically Othered by proxy through the exclusion from a narrative of normativity.

Regarding “education for the Other” Kumashiro discusses that oppression takes place in instances where the Other is assumed and expected to be a certain way, leading to an assimilationist ideology that not only prescribes to the Other how to act and be in order to resist further marginalisation but also to those whom are privileged in order not to become Othered.¹⁹ To work against this Kumashiro emphasized that schools as a whole must be and ought to provide helpful, affirming, therapeutic, empowering and supportive spaces in which pupils can

¹⁶ Kumashiro, Kevin (2000). *Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*. I: Review of Educational Research. Vol. 70, nr. 1 pg.25

¹⁷Ibid. pg.25

¹⁸Ibid. pg.26

¹⁹ Ibid. pg.27

be given resources and support in challenging and dealing with the oppression they face.²⁰ Teachers ought also treat their classes as the diverse spaces that they are and not regard their pupils as a monolithic and normative group but instead explicitly educate in such a way that is conscious of the many differences present among their pupils.²¹

In education about the Other Kumashiro identifies that information on Others is often overgeneralised leading to incomplete accounts that further marginalise the position of groups and people who are Othered.²² Kumashiro suggests that not only should the curriculum include specific classes on the Other but that teachings on Others should be integrated throughout the curriculum so as not to present these topics as something that can be learned from start to finish in one lesson or that isn't intersected in other subjects in the curriculum.²³ Kumashiro also describes how calls for education to lead to empathy often involve teaching about Others in which pupils are encouraged to perceive themselves as “normal” in juxtaposition to and trying to see themselves in the Other.²⁴ Thus empathy simply retains the understanding of an “us” and “them”, while empathy certainly is not a bad thing to feel, especially towards groups who are oppressed, it is insufficient as an end goal as, Kumashiro writes, it has no social value in regards to achieving any actual change.²⁵

The latter two of the four ways of conceptualising and working against oppression are more directed at the discursive Othering procedures in the nature of how schools as institutions and academia is upheld. An example here being that of the “mythical norm” which Kumashiro describes as being perpetuated through attempts of rational detachment.²⁶ In such attempts the teachings of marginalised individuals, or Others, are viewed as not-rational due to their positioning as speaking from a specific standpoint. Those who attempt rational detachment, or those who are perceived as having such a position, are in actuality continuing to perpetuate the “mythical norm” which is founded in an assumption of whiteness, heterosexuality and masculinity.²⁷ This is particularly harmful in sex education as it further Others pupils who are not

²⁰ Kumashiro, Kevin (2000). *Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*. I: Review of Educational Research. Vol. 70, nr. 1 pg.28

²¹ Ibid. pg.29

²² Ibid. pg.32

²³ Ibid. pg.33

²⁴ Ibid. pg.45

²⁵ Ibid. pg.35

²⁶ Ibid. pg.39

²⁷ Ibid. pg.39

included in this address of the “mythical norm”, information relevant to them is left out or tokenised as deviant.

There are many instances where these strategies can be applied in a sex education setting. For instance the oppression that takes place through assumptions and expectations of the Other in Sweden can be directed to many different groups regarding sexuality, towards LGBTQ+ people being negatively stereotyped and tokenized when mentioned while simultaneously being condemned for non-normative gender expression or sexual preferences that are not heteronormative.

2.3.2 Non-Normative Pedagogy

Non-normative pedagogical theory has its origins among Swedish queer theorists. In the 2000s a group of pedagogues coined the term “norm critical pedagogy”, often translated to non-normative pedagogy, their theoretical foundation is laid in queer theory. The aim was to meet the need for a more critical approach to pre-existing pedagogies that held a feminist intersectional disposition that encouraged a critical awareness of the production and reproduction of discriminatory norms²⁸. Due to its origins in queer theory, non-normative pedagogy is a part of the field of gender studies. The nature by which non-normative pedagogy criticises and challenges norms is by identifying which norms are part of an oppressive structure. It is also acknowledged that many norms are reflective of a widely agreed upon morality that is necessary in any society. In regards to sex education, there are norms that originate in both cultural and societal oppressive structures that exist outside of the classroom that need to be discussed and challenged, as well as norms perpetuated in mainstream comprehensive sex education that neednt be taken as much for granted as they are. These two types of norms intersect one another to varying degrees. Examples of these could be external and mainstream norms of sexuality and masculinity, positioning cis-gendered men as having comparatively high libidos which leads to norms and assumptions about essentialist views of male and female sexualities being inherently different. These norms can be identified in narratives taught, as well as the language that shapes the discourse within, in this instance, sex education.

²⁸Bromseth, Janne & Lotta Björkman (red.) (2019): *Normkritisk pedagogik – Perspektiv, utmaningar och möjligheter*. Studentlitteratur: Lund. pg.24

Much of the post-structuralist perspectives used in non-normative pedagogical theory builds on Kevin Kumashiros writing on anti-oppressive education. Post-structural scholarship argues that individuals are more than just limited to the expectations prescribed to their positioning.²⁹ Non-normative pedagogy focuses on the discursive power that creates norms that prescribe social orders.³⁰ It is with a queer theoretical and intersectional outlook that non-normative pedagogy treats the process of how norms are created and recreated. By bringing in not only a perspective of these processes based on gender and sexuality, an intersectional perspective also lifts the context's nationality, ethnicity, ability and class for instance. This entails important discussions on how, especially in the context of sex education, sexuality and nationhood are tied together. The non-Western (or muslim) Other is, in Sweden, conceived of as patriarchal and homophobic while Swedish values are perceived as tolerant and liberal. This manifestation of racist values is known as homo- and homonationalism. As the school is intended to be a mediator of Swedish values there arises a discourse that dichotomizes the groups of non-Swedish Other and Swede as being inherently different in their attitudes towards sexuality and prescribes adherence to these attitudes to differences in national belonging.³¹ Such conceptions can be particularly damaging to those whose positioning intersects these ideas, as I wrote on Kumashiro, negative stereotyping and discrimination based upon it is only furthered when the discourse in education upholds this false subjectivity.

Another central term in non-normative pedagogy is “pedagogy of failure”, which relates to the process of unlearning and relearning ideas and narratives about what is true. Here, the practice of reflexivity is crucial, as one must critically analyse one's own positioning in order to understand our relationships with privilege and Othering. This process can lead to what is called a “crisis of knowledge”, where such insights that shatter our perceptions of narratives and truths, particularly regarding social injustices, can either lead to resistance and denial, especially if our previous ideas benefitted us, or to further a process of unlearning and relearning and working actively to consciously challenge harmful norms and practices.³²

²⁹Bromseth, Janne & Lotta Björkman (red.) (2019): *Normkritisk pedagogik – Perspektiv, utmaningar och möjligheter*. Studentlitteratur: Lund pg.45

³⁰Ibid. pg.48

³¹ Ibid. pg.53

³²Ibid. pgs.56-57

3. Background

The background for this study is based in previous Swedish feminist scholarship on the discourse in school policy texts and the practice of non-normative pedagogy in sex education in Sweden. Furthermore the support material from *Skolverket* on teaching sex education in upper-secondary schools and the new general syllabus as a whole serve to contextualise the framework and principles by which the participants of the study are guided to execute sex education in their respective subjects.

3.1 Previous research

There is already a significant amount of scholarship on Swedish school policy texts and sex education from which I can draw inspiration for my analysis. Irina Schmitt's article, *Sex, Secularism and the Nation, Reading Swedish School Policies*, for instance, discusses 2011s changes in the general curriculum and the ways the terms "sexuality" and "the nation" are invoked within the text as well as their implications in use in the Swedish context.³³ While my analysis focuses on the most recent changes made in 2021, many of the same terms remain in the general curriculum and thus Schmitt provides a useful analysis of the significance of certain terminologies pertaining to sexuality and nationhood that still exist alongside the new formulations in the curriculum. An example here being the opening statement on fundamental values that contains an emphasis on "Christian tradition and Western humanism" being foundational to the values that the school should impart. The implications here being, as Schmitt discusses that as it is also stated that the education should be non-denominational, there is an obvious yet undiscussed contradiction here. A notion of an "us" is implied alongside these fundamental values as their foundations are implied to have Swedish (Christian and Western) origins, thus further suggesting those not belonging to the Swedish "us" to be perceived as Other and not bearing the same values described. Schmitt also discusses the use of the term "könstillhörighet" in the curriculum, explaining that while it has been translated into English as "sexual identity", a more accurate translation would be "belonging to a sex". Here implying a binary view of pupils' gender being mainly significant insofar as its adherence to belonging to one of two genders, rather than using the word "identity" to allow for a broader and more

³³Schmitt, Irina (2012) *Sexuality, Secularism and the Nation, Reading Swedish School Policies*, *Sexualities in Education: A Reader*, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York pg.271

accurate recognition of the diversity of identities pertaining to gender that pupils may have.³⁴ Schmitt's analysis shows how the use of certain terms and words in a document such as the general syllabus can affect its meaning depending on the interpretation of the reader, this is relevant to the analysis as despite all teachers having the same syllabus, discourse and interpretation may be a reason for variations in practice when teaching sex education.

Another relevant study is Jenny Bengtsson and Eva Bolander's 2019 article, *Strategies for Inclusion and Equality - "norm-critical" Sex Education in Sweden*. In this article Bengtsson and Bolander analyse the recurrence of non-normative pedagogical practices in their observations of and interviews with upper secondary school educators. They found that from the educators they interviewed and observed, there were several aspects of non-normative pedagogy practiced in sex education, partly regarding the language chosen and the way negative aspects of sexual practices were framed. Bengtsson and Bolander discuss the tensions that arise from education that is conscious of the potential consequences of "missteps" in one's use of language. They conclude that non-normative pedagogy in sex education opens up many possibilities of dislocating harmful or inaccurate preconceptions regarding sexuality.³⁵ The analysis made by Bengtsson and Bolander gives insight into how, even when teachers are consciously using non-normative methods, there may still be contentious instances where the practice fails to achieve its intended effect.

3.2 Sex and Coexistence education in Upper secondary school, Support material by *Skolverket*

In 2013 *Skolverket* released support material handbooks directed at educators within different levels of education to provide guidance and inspiration for teaching sex education within various different subjects. Here, I will discuss aspects from the support material directed at upper secondary school educators.

Sex education is described as containing three important aspects. These are: Subject integration and subject-intersecting work, specific lessons, days or initiatives and catching questions in flight. The first is intended for the kinds of discussions teachers can provide within their respective subjects, to give pupils perspective and consciousness on norms and values in a way that is relevant to any given, or several, subjects. The second pertains to specific efforts such as lessons, themed days or similar such initiatives that specifically give space to the subject of

³⁴ Schmitt, Irina (2012) *Sexuality, Secularism and the Nation, Reading Swedish School Policies*, *Sexualities in Education: A Reader*, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York pg.275

³⁵ Jenny Bengtsson & Eva Bolander (2020) *Strategies for inclusion and equality – 'norm-critical' sex education in Sweden*, *Sex Education*, 20:2, 154-169

sex education or observe days of significance to topics of equality or sexual health. The third is more directed as unofficial everyday situations where discussions and questions regarding sexual health or equality for example arise inside or out of the classroom, such occurrences that need to be dealt with immediately by educators and other school staff.³⁶

The support material also discusses different ways to work with and relate to sex education as an educator. The significance of conversation is lifted in opposition to discussion, for its use as creating a space for understanding and reflection without necessitating arguing from a standpoint.³⁷ The importance of balancing the personal and the private is also discussed to lift the importance of not involving overly private information and anecdotes that may make pupils uncomfortable while also not taking on an overly moralising standpoint as an educator, so as to facilitate pupils to come to their own conclusions regarding right and wrong.³⁸ Educators are also recommended to collaborate with other teachers and members of staff such as the principal, counselors and school nurses to provide classes with valuable expertise and nuances that may extend past the capacities of individual educators.³⁹

The norm-critical perspective has its own section in the support material. Here the concept of norms that are limiting is described. Heteronormativity and norms regarding gender roles are particularly mentioned as an example of norms that are limiting young people's ability and possibility to act and make decisions. It is also discussed that an "us and them" perspective can be damaging as it creates a disparity between what is considered "normal" and "deviant", here the examples given relate to the example of tokenizing LGBTQ+ issues. Ethnicity, disability, class, age and religion are added as examples of other factors that can create such a disparity yet are not discussed.⁴⁰ It is also mentioned that it can be more challenging for educators to bring up subjects that ought to be promoted such as healthy relationships, sexual health and self confidence, rather than the things that educators are against such as unplanned pregnancy, STIs and honor-related violence.⁴¹

The rest of the support material contains chapters addressing the connection between different subjects to sexuality, equality and relationships as well as the possibilities within the

³⁶ Skolverket (2013), *Sex- och samlevnadsundervisning i gymnasieskolan*, Danagårds Litho, pgs.14-15

³⁷Ibid. pg.19

³⁸ Ibid. pgs.20-21

³⁹ Ibid. pgs.21-23

⁴⁰ Ibid. pgs.26-28

⁴¹ Ibid. pg.24

central contents of the subject at hand, meaning the topics that must be included in the curriculum of said subject, to include aspects of sex education.

3.3 Ordinance of change in the ordinance (SKOLFS 2011:144) of the upper-secondary school syllabus, (SKOLFS 2021:9)

On the 4th of February 2021 *Skolverket* reformulated and added aspects to the general syllabus for secondary education from 2011 (SKOLFS 2011:144). The regulations in the syllabus are to come into effect in June 2021 but are to be applied in education from the autumn semester of 2022.⁴² Despite not yet being a part of the current curriculum I will introduce the changed and added aspects as they are reflections of *Skolverkets*' contemporary view of sex education. The participating teachers in this study are not required to follow the new regulations in this curriculum and may not yet be familiar with them. However, as mentioned above, changes in syllabus and curriculum regulations are affected by both the mainstream and professional discourse of which the participants are a part. It is therefore interesting to have the new general syllabus as a reference for the participants' reflections.

The passage that most specifically addresses the topic of sex education is the following:

The school has a responsibility for pupils to repeatedly in their education meet issues that regard sexuality, consent and relationships. The education should thereby promote all pupils' health and wellbeing and strengthen their conditions to make conscious and independent choices. The school shall contribute to pupils developing and understanding of their own rights and the rights of others and convey that sexuality and relationships are characterised by consent. (SKOLFS 2021:9, pg, 4)

The sentence that asserts that pupils should repeatedly meet issues regarding sexuality, consent and relationships throughout their education is notable.⁴³ These three aspects are to become the new name for sex education in replacement of the previous name "sex och samlevnad" which roughly translates to sex and coexistence. The remaining new passages mention how schools need to address gendered patterns and their effect on individuals' life choices, opportunities and obligations, as well as the critical evaluation of norms. This includes the development of a critical disposition to how these norms are perpetuated through mediums such as pornography. The syllabus also states that the promotion of empathy, openness and respect for people's differences in identity and that discrimination on the basis of identity should be met with

⁴² Skolverket (2021) *Förordning om ändring i förordningen (SKOLFS 2011:144) om läroplan för gymnasieskolan, SKOLFS 2021:9*

⁴³ Ibid. pg.13

knowledge and active measures.⁴⁴Through the approval of these additions to the syllabus by the state institutions *Skolverket* and the Ministry of Education several aspects of a non-normative and anti-oppressive education style are legitimized by at least parts of the state itself, a highly normative apparatus. This shows that, in Sweden, non-normativity has been normalized to the degree that it is advocated for by government agents giving it a status of legitimacy through the state.

4. Method & Methodology

The method for my empirical research has been to execute semi-structured interviews with upper secondary school teachers on how they perform sex education within their respective subjects. These interviews are discursive in nature meaning the participants own interpretation of the meaning of their experiences are prioritised over my own discursive understanding of the topic during the interview. For the analysis, I use feminist critical discourse analysis as a means to connect the results of the interviews to the pedagogical theories.

4.2 Ethical Considerations

The process of executing the interviews and treatment of the material has been conducted according to the recommendations of *Vetenskapsrådet* (Swedish Research Council)⁴⁵. The participants granted informed consent prior to the interviews. They were informed of the purpose of the study, first in the invitation to be interviewed and again, prior to the interview. The participants were also made aware and consented that the interview would be recorded, that the storage of the audio file and transcript documents would be anonymised and that any identifying information such as the names of the schools, colleagues and locations would be anonymised. The participants were also informed of their right to withdraw participation before, during or after the interview as well as to decline to answer any specific question or specific topic without questioning or repercussions.

As this study is based in feminist pedagogical theories and understandings of gender it is necessary that feminist principles also be accounted for in the ethical considerations of data

⁴⁴ Skolverket (2021) *Förordning om ändring i förordningen (SKOLFS 2011:144) om läroplan för gymnasieskolan, SKOLFS 2021:9*, pg.4

⁴⁵ Vetenskapsrådet (2017). God forskningssed.

<https://www.vr.se/analys-och-uppdrag/vianalyserar-och-utvarderar/alla-publikationer/publikationer/2017-08-29-godforskningssed.html>. [2021-08-16]

collection and analytical process. One of the considerations mentioned in *Just Methods* by Alison Jaggar is that research should begin from the problems of the marginalized, primarily in the context of this study that would refer to the pupils being taught sex education as a whole as they are not the ones with the power to decide the contents of their curriculum.⁴⁶ Furthermore the pupils, and indeed teachers, who experience othering due to their gender identity, sexuality, ethnicity or disability are most directly affected by normative and discriminatory discourses in sex education. Considerations towards the effect discourses among the participants and *Skolverkets* guidelines have towards marginalised pupils are central to the analysis.

4.3 Sampling

I have chosen to interview upper secondary school teachers who teach at least one of the subjects listed by *Skolverket* that should include aspects of sexual education. The interviewees consist of five upper secondary school teachers, three of whom teach natural science and biology. One, is a social sciences teacher who gives lessons focusing on the topic of pornography as a supplement to the sex education in natural science classes. The final participant I interviewed teaches humanities subjects in a department of upper secondary school for pupils with an autism diagnosis, the curriculum for these students is the same as in mainstream school while alterations are made in the general class structure such as fewer pupils per class and shorter lessons to accommodate their needs.

To find interviewees I sent out invitations by email to teachers in three larger upper secondary schools in a municipality in southern Sweden, of the around 100 teachers I emailed, only two responded that they would be interested in participating, both of whom were natural science teachers. In order to access teachers with social scientific subjects I contacted a former teacher asking for suggestions for possible interviewees among their colleagues. From this I gained three additional interviewees who taught natural science, humanities and social sciences respectively. The names of the participants in this study are pseudonyms and bear no resemblance to the participants actual names except for their being common Swedish names for people between the ages of 25 and 60.

Participant	Subjects	Years Teaching	Gender
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⁴⁶ Jaggar, Alison M. (red.) (2013). *Just methods: an interdisciplinary feminist reader*. Second edition. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm Publishers. pg.458

Patrik	Natural Science, Biology	23 years	Male
Andreas	Social science, special topic class on porn	11 years	Male
Gustav	Natural Science, Biology	18 years	Male
Jonas	Natural Science, Biology	4 years	Male
Maria	History, Religion, Philosophy	14 years	Female

4.4 Interviews

The format of interview for this study is the semi-structured qualitative interview. The qualitative interview itself is suited to the study and subsequent discourse analysis as it prioritises the meaning of the participants' experiences as they themselves interpret it.⁴⁷ Gathering the data required for such an analysis gives the participants the possibility to speak freely when responding to the interview questions, ask their own follow up questions and for myself as an interviewer, to ask for further clarifications, all of which would not be possible in a too heavily structured format making the semi-structured interview most suitable to this study. The discourse analysis in this study is also aided by having a discursive perspective on the interview itself meaning that while asking for clarifications for instance, I was aware that myself and the participant in question may not hold the same discourse on the same topic which will be accounted for in the analysis.⁴⁸

The interview was divided into three main parts. Beginning with questions about the interviewees general approach to teaching sex education and the background they had in doing so, including whether or not it related to any methods formed by *Skolverket* or other external sources. The second part focused on participants methods in teaching sex education and how they related to *Skolverkets* ' support material. The third part included questions to see how the contents of their teaching contained non-normative pedagogy in accordance with the pedagogical

⁴⁷ Kvale, Steinar och Svend Brinkmann (2014). *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun*. 3:e upplagan. Lund: Studentlitteratur. pgs.17, 46

⁴⁸ Ibid pg.197

theories and norm-critical points from the general curriculum. Through the responses and dialogue in these parts, further information came forth regarding the discourse held by the participants on various topics relevant to sex education. I have intentionally not asked specifically about approaches to education on LGBTQ+ experiences and issues, disabilities, racism, to name a few examples as I wanted to see what topics the participants themselves deemed significant or relevant to talk about.

The interviews were conducted over the online meeting platform Zoom using an encrypted link and lasted between 30-45 minutes. I deemed meeting in person not to be appropriate due to social distancing requirements as they took place in April and May of 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. One could argue for interviews over Zoom to be of a lower quality than in-person interviews. There are both disadvantages and advantages to this format. Zoom interviews can be difficult due to inexperience with the specific platform and eventual technical difficulties like poor internet connection and the connection between interviewee and interviewer can be tainted by the less personal format of meeting. An advantage with Zoom is the convenience and comfortability of being able to meet in one's own home or office without the need for either party to commute or pay any fees in order to be present. Also, due to the present circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic all of the participants had held lessons over Zoom or similar platforms during periods over the last year when lessons had been moved online. Being used to online meetings and seminars myself, having the interview over Zoom was a familiar prospect for all parties. The interviews were conducted in Swedish and transcribed in full in Swedish. The passages used in the analysis are transcribed from Swedish to English.

4.5 Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis

As a method of analysis, I use Feminist critical discourse analysis which derives from Critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA is used to study the relationship between the discursive and social practices of texts. Through CDA one does so by looking at a text and analysing it regarding not just the content of the text itself but also the discursive practices that relate to its production and consumption as well as the wider social practice that the text belongs to. In this context the text is the interview responses from the teachers. The discursive practice entails the way their responses relate to the discourses within the curriculum and support material as well as the existing practices within their line of work as upper secondary educators. The social practice

regards the ways in which broader social aspects influence and are influenced by discursive practice.⁴⁹ While many examples of CDA can be said to be feminist Michelle M. Lazar explains that a specifically feminist CDA is needed in order for the aspect of gender in discourse to be analysed in an explicitly feminist way. This means it does not only deal with gender in discourse but is also concerned with using such an analysis as a means to bring to light the gendered aspects of the social practices and to be openly committed to the use of its critique for social change.⁵⁰

Feminist CDA is particularly suited to the nature of this study as it calls one to view the relationship between social practices, namely the methods of educating sex education by the participants, and the discourse structures that the participants are operating within. The analysis in this study is, in accordance with feminist CDA aimed at calling to attention discourses that sustain oppressive social structures, such as hetero- and cis-normativity in sex education, and mobilizing theory, in this case that of non-normative and anti-oppressive pedagogy to develop strategies for change.⁵¹ Lazar's wording of "mobilizing theory to develop strategies for change" also bears some similarity to Kumashiro's project of "understanding the dynamics of oppression and articulating ways to work against it". While these have similar meanings, Kumashiro's theory of anti-oppressive education is such a theory that can be mobilized to develop strategies for change. Lazar is explicit that a feminist CDA does not provide a scientifically neutral stance, this is particularly relevant to the analysis of the data given by participants who teach natural science. Rather, the feminist position in this case recognises the social and historical constructions prevalent in all subjects as theorised in the pedagogical theories in this study.⁵² In the analysis of this study I use a feminist perspective to examine not only how the accounts of the participants relate to the theories of this study but also to take into account how the various discourses relate to the power dynamics inherent to gender and sexuality.

4.6 Categorization of data

As a means of reducing the data provided in the interview transcripts, I have chosen to categorize the contents into primary and sub-categories. In *Från Stoff till Studie* it is recommended that the

⁴⁹ Jørgensen, Marianne, Phillips, Louise J.(2011) *Critical Discourse Analysis, In: Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, SAGE Publications Ltd, pg.9

⁵⁰ Lazar, Michelle, M. (2007) *Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis: Articulating a Feminist Discourse Praxis*, Critical Discourse Studies, 4:2, pgs.144-146

⁵¹ Ibid. pgs.144-146

⁵² Ibid. pg.146

initial coding be broad and open to provide a comprehensive overview of the contents of one's data.⁵³ As the interviews in this study contain open ended questions, the various participants often brought up quite different examples and topics than one another making categorization based on different topics of sex education difficult. The analysis is intended to look at the use of various discourses by the participants regarding their teaching sex education, the topics they brought up and the way they did so. To find common themes that relate to my theoretical background, I read through the interview transcripts thoroughly and underlined thematic statements which, although they bear different meanings to different participants, can be related to one another within the same theme. The themes that both reflect the subject of this study and the topics most frequently spoken about by the participants are gender and sexuality as they pertain to the participants personally and among their pupils and as a topic in the curriculum. The second theme is norms and non-normativity both as the participants relate them to the subject of gender and sexuality and as a concept to be contended with in their teaching.

5. Analysis

In this chapter I present data relating to the chosen categories based on the most prevalent themes from the interviews. The data is analysed as it relates to the theoretical framework presented above and *Skolverkets*' guidelines.

5.1 Gender and sexuality

There are several instances where the theme of gender has arisen throughout the interviews. The three categories I have identified are the following: Personal experiences with gender, namely where the participants have reflected on their own experience of their gender having an effect on their relationship with the subject and pupils. Secondly I analyse gender and sexuality in their own sex education curriculums, this category informs on which aspects of gender and sexuality, as well as what narrative regarding them, that the participants use. The third section pertains to the participants' reflections on their experience of their pupils' relationships with gender and sexuality.

⁵³ Rennstam, Jens och David Wästerfors (2015). *Från stoff till studie-Om analysarbete i kvalitativ forskning*. Lund: Studentlitteratur AB. pg.75

5.1.1 Self and gender

The participants who spoke about their own gender identity affecting aspects of their teaching were Patrik and Andreas. Both are male but had almost opposite experiences of how their gender affects their approach to the subject of sex education and with their pupils. Patrik had the following to say on teaching sex education as a male teacher:

“I have a hard time talking about this kind of thing for the simple reason that.. If you talk about this kind of thing as a white middle aged man then you.. You immediately have a kind of disadvantage “You can't speak on that” etc, you see? (...) I do think that it is the middle class and middle aged that set the norms for society, that it is me who sets it really, for some reason. I don't know exactly how but I apparently... I do.” - Patrik

Patrik's reflections are counteracted by Andreas' reflections on resistance from pupils while teaching sex education as a male teacher:

“It happens very rarely because, since I am a man and am not questioned, what I say becomes very much a truth, I would say. (...) When I give my colleagues the same material then the women are met with a completely different resistance, even though they are, like, more competent than myself. It's about me being a man and them being women.” - Andreas

Both of these statements relate to Kumashiro's term the “mythical norm” described by Kumashiro⁵⁴ as a discursively Othering procedure that places identities such as being white, middle class and being male as an inherently objective standpoint. Andreas has in his statement here, exemplified how educators that do not fit into this “mythical norm”, such as his female colleagues, are met with a higher level of resistance and questioning from pupils for making the same statements and analysis on pornography. Somewhat similarly, Patrik appears to be aware of having a hegemonic position due to the identities he listed. However he described it as being a disadvantage due to lacking any interpretive precedence, demonstrated by paraphrasing a student claiming he could not speak on something given that he is a man.

⁵⁴ Kumashiro, Kevin (2000). *Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*. I: Review of Educational Research. Vol. 70, nr. 1 pg.39

Jonas' reflection does not necessarily only pertain to gender yet had a more optimistic approach to any eventual limitations per his own identity.

“I'm limited in my own identities, I don't fit in everything one can or would want to be and therefore one wants to get help from the entire classroom and let them meet each other in this and see each others different identities and belongings and feelings about it” - Jonas

Jonas' approach here enforces the idea that regardless of how hegemonic or marginalized factors of his own identity are, it is necessary to create a dialogue among the entire class to facilitate the diversity of social identities and experiences relevant to the topic. This approach relates to non-normative pedagogies term “pedagogy of failure” where reflexivity is crucial to unlearning and relearning normative ideas.⁵⁵ Patrik, Andreas and Jonas relate in different ways to *Skolverkets*' support materials guidelines to operating in a norm-critical way when educating on the subject of gender and sexuality.

Andreas also later mentioned how he rarely encountered any resistance in his classes when discussing non-normative ideas on gender and sexuality:

“It might be negative but I don't think that they dare to have certain discussions (with me) because they know who i am, they know what i stand for and they probably keep their opinions to themselves so I don't get to hear and see all that sh*t” - Andreas

This statement reflects that, as non-normativity becomes legitimised through its normalisation within the general syllabus, it is possible that teachers such as Andreas and potentially others see an increasing inclination for students to self-censor or resist questioning of non-normative perspectives. The possibility for a “crisis of knowledge”, which in non-normative pedagogical theory is described as a critical part of unlearning prejudice, to occur is stunted as students become resistant towards voicing opinions that they expect their teacher to disagree with for being too normative. While crises of knowledge can in some cases lead to denial and resistance it remains an intrinsic part of breaking away from overgeneralised or prejudiced narratives.

5.1.2 Gender and sexuality in the curriculum

Throughout the interviews gender and sexuality were the most frequent examples of topics regarding normativity and equality mentioned by the participants, topics such as ethnicity and

⁵⁵ Bromseth, Janne & Björkman, Lotta (red.) (2019): *Normkritisk pedagogik – Perspektiv, utmaningar och möjligheter*. Studentlitteratur: Lund. pgs. 56-57

culture, while mentioned in *Skolverkets* ' support material and the general curriculum were discussed far less. For teachers of biology and natural sciences the concept of gender in particular was often juxtaposed with topics such as sexual hormones and reproduction. Notably it is within these subjects that most education on gendered norms and practices are linked to biological factors such as sexual hormones and reproduction. As described by Connell and Pearse, to speak about gender within the reproductive arena is to socially embody the various biological qualities associated with gender.⁵⁶ Patrik gave an anecdote based on the supposed difference in necessary caloric intake for different sexes.

“I emphasize that there are differences between biological sexes, we cannot deny this, but it doesn't need to result in women having lower wages. There's no connection there, that's a part I usually emphasize” - Patrik

This statement cannot be argued with. Any biological difference between human beings, be it reproductive or genetic or otherwise should not result in an economic disparity. However following a subsequent discussion with his pupils on men and women's supposed different requirements for food, Patrik's argument was the following:

“I counterpointed that men don't spend as much money on makeup and sanitary products and then we were (laugh) more in agreement on equal pay” - Patrik

Despite the conclusion of this retold discussion ending in an agreement on equal pay it lacks a historical and sociological context. Women have not historically been paid less due to needing less calories than men and there are many factors beyond the individual need or preference to purchase makeup and sanitary products. This argument also does not account for the experience and lives of trans, non-binary and intersex people, the nuances of which are described as relevant in natural science classes in *Skolverkets* ' support material.⁵⁷ Andreas teaches supplementary classes in sex education primarily through the lens of the topic of pornography and is also one of two teachers at his school tasked with improving aspects of gender equality. He had a somewhat reductive stance on which topics were necessary to discuss to account to the breadth of experiences and identities amongst his pupils.

⁵⁶ Connell, Raewyn, & Pearse, Rebecca (2002, 2016) *Gender; In World Perspective*. Third edition. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press. pgs. 50-51

⁵⁷ Skolverket (2013), *Sex- och samlevnadsundervisning i gymnasieskolan*, Danagårds Litho pgs. 41, 43

“This is a gender equality⁵⁸ task, so its about male and female, then one can identify as other things and we are not just supposed to make things good for women, we should make it good for everyone. Because in some way I think that the approach is the same regardless of which minority we are to help. (...) when it comes to sex education, then I have very much a man and women perspective.” - Andreas

Kumashiro writes on “education about the Other” that the overgeneralization of information about the Other leads to incomplete accounts that are further marginalizing. In an anti-oppressive educational approach it is insufficient to make the assumption that focusing on equality within a binary understanding of gender would guarantee making it “good for everyone”. As long as a marginalised group is conceptualised as a generalised appendage, critical approaches to what causes their marginalisation and the articulation of ways to work against that would not be possible in the classroom. Among the teachers of natural science, biology and evolution are used as tools with which to explain and legitimise both biological and social diversity in sex and gender. Here one can see a discourse on gender and sexuality in the reproductive arena used as a tool to educate pupils that norms such as binary gender equated with sexual organs and heteronormativity do not have a place within the scientific world. Jonas and Gustav used the same call to a scientific “natural variation” as a means to use biology as a legitimising factor both in genetic gender variations and social identity. Jonas said the following regarding variation in social identity:

“Especially gender norms in biology, evolution and such things to show that variations in sexuality exists in all organisms and to fight the stereotype that everything except heterosexuality is abnormal and shouldnt exist” - Jonas

In the context of teaching about genitalia and more specifically the topic of intersex and what that means both biologically and socially, Gustav also used the term “natural variation”:

“There are extremities which are the typical male and female genitalia, which is natural, but there is also the natural *variation* which I always get back to and it's that variation that is the purpose of sexual reproduction, that there needs to be a great variation.” - Gustav

The only teacher to mention sexualities other than hetero-, homo-, and bisexuality was Patrik who stated the following:

“I usually talk about the asexuals for example, those who dont want to have sex. It's nothing, it's not an issue for them and there is that variant of preference too. They can

⁵⁸ Gender equality here is translated from the word “jämställdhet” which unlike the similar word “jämlighet”, is associated with equality between binary sexes rather than a general concept of equality for all.

have children also, it's just to endure on a saturday night on occasion.. But there are all kinds of scales here”

While this description of what asexuality is for some, not entirely incorrect (however overgeneralized) many asexuals do not want to engage in any sexual activities, others have a more neutral relationship to sex, and indeed there is no universal asexual experience. The latter sentence in this statement, I interpret as having violent implications to potential understandings of asexuality. Sexual experiences, for reproduction and otherwise should not be something that can simply be “endured”. Furthermore the context of “a saturday night on occasion” situates sexual activities as a “special occasion” occurrence. This understanding of having sex as an asexual being something that must be endured, both pertains to an idea of sexless lives as inconceivable as well as presenting pupils with an inconclusive explanation of asexuality. The repercussions of such an understanding not only being further marginalisation for asexual people but also potentially violent treatment based upon an understanding like this.

5.1.3. Gender and sexuality among pupils

All of the participants spoke about how their pupils, according to the participants, referred to norms on gender and sexuality and how non-normative perspectives from pupils affected their teaching. Maria, whose pupils with an autism-diagnosis are predominantly male explained that she often used relatable and practical examples of gender discrimination when teaching her pupils. She described a “toxic male role” that many of her male students feel they may need to live up to and that she intended her lessons and discussions with her students to be a means to alleviate them personally from any gendered expectations and behaviour that they may not desire to or be able to live up to. Patrik described a former pupil who “didn't want to be known as a “he” or a “she” so they were a “they”(hen)”⁵⁹ whose classmates did not respect their preferred pronouns and eventually ended up changing schools due to this. Patrik explained further that in classes with the aforementioned pupil he emphasised even more that a breadth in diversity is a positive and natural thing from a scientific point of view only to be perceived as overly political by some pupils. When met with pupils claiming that what he has taught “cannot be true” Patriks response was “you can think what you want but science knows”. While a reflexive dialogue that contests some pupils preconceptions about gender identity is a productive means to facilitate a

⁵⁹ “Hen” is a gender-neutral pronoun in Swedish. It is used both as a personal pronoun, often for people who are non-binary or genderqueer, and to refer to people whose gender is unknown or irrelevant.

possible “crisis of knowledge”⁶⁰ for the disagreeing pupils, Kumashiro also explains that schools and their faculties ought to make the school space affirming and supportive for students regarded as Other.⁶¹

The same teacher however experienced criticism from pupils for not including enough imagery and information in his sex education classes on same-sex relationships and sexual practices. Having been confronted by a pupil about this, Patrik conceded that he did add more imagery to his slides however somewhat reluctantly citing that “political correctness” should not be prioritised over engaging heterosexual pupils, supposedly 90% of the school, as they may not feel that the information was relevant to them. The practice of excluding visuals and descriptions on same-sex couples further Others those outside of the heterosexual norm as well as decreasing the possibility for pupils, heterosexual and otherwise, unlearn heterosexist preconceptions. This, evidently to the frustration of at least one pupil who themselves were critical towards heteronormativity in their class material. This is also an interesting anecdote in relation to the several accounts given by Patrik that pupils generally are often overly “black and white” in their thinking and overly individualistic rather than scientific. He also explained that over the years he has had “bouts of homosexuals” in his classes that needed a “boost” as “they often feel repressed”, disclaiming that this wasn't something he necessarily knew for sure that they felt or needed. This further pertains to Kumashiros description of the “mythical norm” leading to treatment of individuals and topics that do not solely regard the norm, as irrelevant to the purpose of the class and only brought up as a subject of pity, or in need of “boosting”. Having partaken in several guest lectures and seminars Gustav had the following to say on the same topic:

“You always have to be aware that one or two (pupils) can be homosexual in every class, every lesson and you have to have that with you. But through discussions and by bringing up variations you demystify the whole thing or don't make a big deal out of it. Instead, making these variations.. It's a natural variation and that's life so my way of tackling that is always getting back to the fact that variation is natural. And desirable” - Gustav

As Kumashiro writes on the subject of education for the Other, Gustav describes his outlook on his pupils as a diverse group of which he is conscious of the variety of identities present among

⁶⁰ Bromseth, Janne & Lotta Björkman (red.) (2019): *Normkritisk pedagogik – Perspektiv, utmaningar och möjligheter*. Studentlitteratur: Lund. pgs.56-57

⁶¹ Kumashiro, Kevin (2000). *Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*. I: Review of Educational Research. Vol. 70, nr. 1 pg.28

them. Gustav recounts having a constant discourse in his classes about both biological and social variations among people in order for non-normative variations to become “demystified”.⁶² Similarly, Jonas explained how he used terminology in a conscious way so as to not exclude anyone. He described using language such as “those of us who are homosexual” rather than “those who are”, this example of how small changes in terminology also changes the meaning of a statement which otherwise would contribute to a discourse that places homosexual people, for instance, as other.⁶³ On the practice of using non-normative and inclusive terminology Jonas reflected that, especially in biology, it can be difficult to steer completely clear of normative or stereotypical models for explaining phenomena, but that it also was a process in which one can make mistakes while remaining reflective and critical even towards one's own phrasing. This reflection bears similarity to the results of Bengtsson and Bolanders study on non-normative pedagogical practices among teachers, that tensions can arise when educators are conscious of potential missteps in the language they use.⁶⁴

Maria explained talking to her students about gender norms by encouraging a reflexivity based on her pupils common experience as being autistic. Within her subjects, especially history and religion she facilitated discussions on norms regarding gender and sexuality in order to make the subject of norms and normativity as a whole easier to talk about and thus easier to recognize how they both contribute and are affected by Othering in their personal lives.

“(…) its about making it talkable and showing them how these structures actually have permeated their whole lives and after a while they start to recognize it and then the curiosity and interest increases and they even end up a little irritated for other reasons (than before) in the end and they maybe end up thinking that there should be more space for individuality rather than following the stream because one has a specific gender or belongs to a specific group” - Maria

Before interviewing Maria I had a preconception that, as all of her pupils have an autism diagnosis, that autism itself would not be a topic of much discussion as it would be in a sense a norm within the classroom setting. Maria however explained that even in the setting of the department where she works where all the pupils have an autism diagnosis they will be acting

⁶² Kumashiro, Kevin (2000). *Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*. I: Review of Educational Research. Vol. 70, nr. 1 pg.29

⁶³ Bromseth, Janne & Lotta Björkman (red.) (2019): *Normkritisk pedagogik – Perspektiv, utmaningar och möjligheter*. Studentlitteratur: Lund. pg.24

⁶⁴ Jenny Bengtsson & Eva Bolander (2020) *Strategies for inclusion and equality – ‘norm-critical’ sex education in Sweden*, Sex Education, 20:2, 154-169

elsewhere in their lives in spaces where the norm is to be neurotypical. As Kumashiro writes on “education for the Other”, Marias approach is not directed to prescribing an assimilationist ideology unto her pupils but rather creating a space for them to challenge their shared prescribed norms and also create an awareness of a diversity of experiences and identities both within and outside of the classroom.⁶⁵

5.2 Norms and Non-Normativity

Education on and discussions about norms is central both in anti-oppressive and non-normative pedagogy and within the general syllabus and recommendations from *Skolverket* in sex education. In interviewing the participants of this study I did ask direct questions regarding their inclusion of these aspects in sex education. However the interpretation of which norms were relevant to the subject are reflective of the connections made by the participants as to what norms are relevant to their classes. For Maria and Andreas the two most common examples of topics used for critically discussing norms were masculinity and pornography. Both expressed concern about the ever increasing accessibility of pornography and its explicit and implicit optics. They described the rise of this trajectory as having the potential to negatively impact their pupils perspectives on sexual relations and violence, especially among male pupils. Thus discussions of masculinity, in Marias case described as poisonous or toxic male roles, was described as highly necessary to convey to their pupils. Andreas described how in his lessons that specifically had pornography as a subject, he used it as a platform to discuss norms on gender roles when it came to sexual activities.

“One looks at pornography and then its very much about making visible the norms that you actually see and that one perhaps hasnt reflected on before right? How one, how is a man, woman, expected to be when it comes to sex for example. It's about illustrating ideas of how one is supposed to be? And then like, ok, if we now all agree that there is some kind of norm what do we think is good about it? What do we think isn't good? What would we want to counteract? And, how does one do that? What I think, what a lot of it is all about, its about getting in the pupils, “what do you think about this?”” - Andreas

This method of discussing a topic with pupils in order to encourage a critical disposition is in line with the new general syllabus’ points on critically evaluating norms. Jonas spoke of a similar yet more structured activity on norms that he often did with his pupils. The activity centered on

⁶⁵ Kumashiro, Kevin (2000). *Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*. I: Review of Educational Research. Vol. 70, nr. 1 pgs.27-29

normative statements being read out and the pupils choosing a place in the room to stand that was reflective of their stance on each statement. Jonas explained that they began with discussing what norms are as a whole and bringing up examples of norms such as taking off ones shoes when entering a house, discussing that in Sweden taking off shoes is a norm but that can vary in other countries and cultures. A specific part of the exercise was intended to encourage reflection of the privileges that come with being a part of a norm as well as discussing the social repercussions of not being a part of a norm.

“One specific exercise was to, clarify the privileges for those who were the norm instead of like “whats the problem with those that are outside of the norm?”, so it turns it around a little but its still the same thing, just the other side of the coin” - Jonas

Andreas was reflective of the use of such an activity causing an internal understanding of an “us” and a “them” based on how a pupil personally identified with privileges and marginalisation based on their identities. He added that self reflection, reflexivity, much in the way that Maria described doing with her pupils, may well be the first step in creating a norm critical disposition and an understanding of how different people's identities and groups can vary in non-normative ways and that is not a negative thing. Gustav in particular had created his entire sex education curriculum with different types of relationships and norms within those relationships in the centre. By discussing relationships with friends, family, classmates a space was created to discuss further how norms affect the nature of these relationships as well as discussing less normative categories related to them such as “friends with benefits”. Maria explained using relatable and familiar examples of norms as a means to also discuss more theoretical concepts such as dichotomies, hierarchies and power structures that are necessary for a non-normative and critical understanding of the topics within her subjects of history, religion and philosophy.

The only participant with a more negative understanding was Patrik, upon being asked the question of if he does anything to encourage norm critical views in his sex education he stated the following:

“Critical is a difficult word these days. Too critical often involves a negative attitude towards norms, it's interpreted that way. One should be critical and then there's no positive criticism anymore so, i'd rather ask them to be reflective on norms. Rather than critical if you understand the difference? (...) Every culture is going to have norms. That's something I'm pretty sure of. I don't think we can be free of norms because that's a norm in and of itself, to not have norms, but then should that be let go?(...) Norms.. A completely norm-free society, what would that look like?” - Patrik

While it is stated quite clearly in the new syllabus how norm criticism should be directed towards gendered norms that can be understood to negatively impact decision making or oppressive structures on the basis of gender, it can be understandable that as this formulation in the syllabus is not yet applied, this concept is unfamiliar for teachers such as Patrik. Terms such as using a “norm-critical disposition” from *Skolverkets*’ guidelines and the new general syllabus may therefore be interpreted quite differently by different teachers. While such terminologies do have specific meanings, it is evident here that, as Schmitt points out, the meaning of terms in texts such as the general syllabus is affected by the interpretation of the reader leading to inconsistencies in the practice of sex education.⁶⁶ Patrik’s understanding that norm criticism entails an inherently negative approach to norms is understandable and perhaps an encouragement to be reflective on norms has a similar effect. Kumashiro explains that the two projects of an anti-oppressive education are to “understand the dynamics of oppression and articulate ways to work against them”, to reflect upon norms, as Patrik encourages, is indeed an aspect of understanding the dynamics of oppression, yet to articulate ways to work against it one needs to facilitate more than just reflection and understanding.⁶⁷ Norms on their own are indeed somewhat neutral, it is the eventual oppressive conceptions that caused them and consequences of their use that lead to marginalisation and oppression that are what necessitates both reflection and criticism as well as the encouragement to work against them. It is also interesting how it is described that “freedom from norms” would become a norm in and of itself, implying that a non-normative approach aims at eradicating norms entirely. This is a statement that, from a postmodernist perspective, would be unattainable, nor is it in fact the aim of non-normative pedagogy to eradicate norms entirely. As specified in the description of the theory, the approach is directed at critiquing discriminatory norms.⁶⁸ However, even upon reflection, which norms one deems discriminatory or otherwise reflective of morals one disagrees with can be subjective even for teachers following the same general syllabus.

⁶⁶Schmitt, Irina (2012) *Sexuality, Secularism and the Nation, Reading Swedish School Policies*, Sexualities in Education: A Reader, Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York pg. 271

⁶⁷ Kumashiro, Kevin (2000). *Toward a Theory of Anti-Oppressive Education*. I: Review of Educational Research. Vol. 70, nr. 1 pg.25

⁶⁸ Jenny Bengtsson & Eva Bolander (2020) *Strategies for inclusion and equality – ‘norm-critical’ sex education in Sweden*, Sex Education, 20:2, pg.24

6. Summary & Discussion

The aim of this study has been to analyse teachers discussions of the non-normative and anti-oppressive aspects of *Skolverkets*' guidelines and regulations in their teaching of sex education. Furthermore I have analysed the respective discourses surrounding non-normativity in their sex education and the topics they have mentioned as relevant in this subject. As I have mentioned before, some issues that were seen as separate from gender and sexuality were not central to participants' conversations. One of these being the topic of race, ethnicity and immigration. Kumashiros theory on anti-oppressive education and non-normative pedagogy as a whole have intersectional approaches to all forms of marginalisation and oppression, it is however not mentioned as a category specifically in the general syllabus however it is in *Skolverkets*' guidelines but only in relation to the subjects of religion and social science.⁶⁹ Cultural norm comparisons arose occasionally regarding norms pertaining to family for instance but most of the participants dismissed or did not mention ethnic identity as a relevant nuance to topics related to sex education. While honor related oppression and violence is mentioned multiple times in both the general syllabus and in *Skolverkets*' guidelines this was not mentioned by any of the participants in this study. Issues that pertained to trans and non-binary gender identities were mentioned a little by some participants but often as an appendage when discussing gender equality between men and women. The only teacher to discuss disability was Maria who did so in relation to her pupils who all have an autism diagnosis, however this pertained to one form of neurodivergence where a different approach would be necessary to educate for or about other forms of neurodivergence or mental and physical disabilities. Also missing was any discourse on norm critical and intersectional approaches to educating on traditional aspects of sex education such as anatomy, STI-prevention and reproduction. While not all of these topics are explicit aspects of *Skolverkets*' general guidelines or those specific to different subjects the topics less mentioned and those mentioned more frequently are revealing of a somewhat common discourse between various participants of the topics at the forefront of relevance in sex education.

All of the teachers of natural science mentioned teaching comprehensively on the subject of intersex as a common aim to educate pupils on the biological reality that neither sex or gender

⁶⁹ Skolverket (2013), *Sex- och samlevnadsundervisning i gymnasieskolan*, Danagårds Litho, pgs. 63, 75

is binary. This said, education on the topic of intersex is a part of a scientific reality that is relevant to the subject of biology and would be reductive to not include. Patrik, Gustav and Jonas expressed an awareness of how learning about intersex challenges pupils normative understandings of biological sexes and thus how that relates to gender as a social phenomenon.

Skolverkets' guidelines and the new general curriculum frequently recommend facilitating critical dispositions towards gender norms as they pertain to men and women, among all the participants in this study criticism was directed towards norms of masculinity rather than femininity. This indicates a shared discourse of gender norms that places aspects of masculinity as the foremost issue to be worked against. While masculinity norms are definitely important to critically discuss this may make discussions around femininity norms secondary. Thus sidelining a need to also critically examine the effects of the expectations associated with feminine gender roles. The concerns expressed by Maria, Andreas and Gustav on how contemporary porn may affect young people are reflective of a mainstream discourse in Sweden that presumably has also placed education on pornography within the general syllabus.

All participants except Patrik had a positive disposition towards including a norm-critical perspective in their sex education. Maria and Andreas had developed norm-critical aspects in their lessons independently of *Skolverkets'* guidelines. Gustav and Jonas in particular expressed an openness and that they had taken on recommendations for non-normative methods from guest lecturers and the school board.

While some of *Skolverkets'* recommended topics for norm-criticism were not a part of the participants discourse, those that were are reflective of contemporary mainstream discourses on gender normativity in natural science, the positioning of masculinity as an increasingly relevant subject matter and concerns on the influences of porn consumption. The fact that *Skolverkets'* regulations and guidelines with norm critical and non-normative characteristics come from a government authority appears to be of little significance. These characteristics to have entered discourses among teachers in a more indirect fashion, the adherence to which is dependent on the participants own disposition toward and conception of non-normativity in sex education and its objective. Teachers' familiarity with, and more consensus on the meaning of norm-criticism within the syllabus may in the future be made possible through schools facilitating ongoing communication and collaboration across different subjects and even schools.

One's education does not end when one graduates upper-secondary school, nor is it final after one has attained a bachelors or masters degree. It is an ever ongoing process that can never be finalized as research progresses and changing discourses give what we once thought to be true entirely new meanings. Thus the same must be said of teachers educating sex education. The process of learning and unlearning prejudice, the exposure to crises of knowledge and keeping up with contemporary discourses while being critical of the norms they create is a constant project not only for teachers but for anyone wishing to dispute and counteract marginalisation and othering.

6.1 Further Research

This study is limited both in the amount of participants and the diversity among them. More extensive research with a wider demographic of participants would possibly reveal stronger trends in discourses as well as how variables such as geographic location and social identity among teachers impact their methods.

As Swedish schools begin to put the new general syllabus into practice there is also the implication of norm-critical pedagogy becoming further normalised, the results of which are yet to be shown. The participating teachers in this study have shared their experienced yet subjective understandings on the perspectives of their pupils, both overgeneralising and hypothesising their perspectives. Research that included pupils own accounts or observational research that viewed first hand, lessons, discussions and conversations within the classroom would possibly reveal more on the prevailing discourses in upper-secondary school sex education. Particularly as the current political climate adapts to new norms in sex education and the tensions that creates.

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