

Network: Gender and Education

Title of paper: Constructing a 'Nordic Nativeness' in Swedish Sexuality Education

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Abstract:

The Nordic countries' progressive sexuality education (SE) has become synonymous with gender equality, sex-positive attitudes, and norm-critical awareness (Allen & Rasmussen, 2016; Bengtsson & Bolander, 2020; Zimmerman, 2015). In global comparison, Nordic SE is perceived to be a queer utopia regarding LGBTQ rights (Kjaran, 2017). Despite the prominence, feminist scholars argue it to cultivate forms of sexuality through notions of secularism and progressive pedagogy (Scott, 2018). According to Scott (2018) has Western sexual freedom represented the "fulfilling of natural inclinations of all women" (p. 157) in which sexual desire becomes a defining attribute of the human and a form of "natural law outside of history" (ibid). Svendsen (2017) argues the secular logic within Norwegian SE to be an 'operating technology', constructing a secular native and a religious Other. Similar constructions have been found by Honkasalo (2018) in Finnish textbooks, where culture is assigned to non-Finnish Others in contrast to liberal and progressive "Finnish" sexuality. When seemingly neutral and depoliticized notions of sexuality, the human body, health, and morality are addressed in SE, it becomes crucial to think about how these notions affect educational practices. In this paper we continue the path of critique and explore Swedish SE to understand how 'Nordic nativeness' is constructed through educational practices. Our data consists of observations, interviews, and textbooks in which we highlight how 'the native' and 'the Other' are represented. In our paper, we use a thematic analysis to flesh out how positions of 'nativeness' and 'otherness' are represented in SE. Our preliminary findings support previous research but also present a paradox in which attempts of widening perspectives simultaneously re-construct and re-position nativeness and otherness. Although the empirical example is from a Swedish context, the paper's results are of interest to a wider audience because it contributes to an understanding of how sexuality education is actively positions different ethical, social, political, and cultural values.

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