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# The teaching body in sexuality education – intersections of age, gender, and sexuality

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## ABSTRACT

This paper illuminates how teachers are influenced by age, gender and sexuality in teaching about sex and relationships. In this analysis grounded in feminist theory, age, gender and sexuality are considered to be enacted as doings. Six interviews with teachers working with sexuality education in K-12 schools in Sweden were chosen from of a larger body of material consisting of 21 interviews with professionals engaged in school-based sexuality education. The six interviewees were selected because they explicitly addressed how teachers' age, gender and/or sexuality come to matter in the classroom. Findings show how male and female teachers organise their teaching in relation to normative expectations of age, gender and sexuality. In sexuality education, the diverse life-courses of (hetero)sexual women offer a wide range of pedagogic possibilities for female teachers to address issues of sexuality, consent and relationships whereas male teachers are constrained to doing safe(r) forms of masculinity by directing attention away from their bodies and experiences. In understanding these results, I argue that the figure of the *tant* has been key in forming the pedagogic backdrop to Swedish sexuality education, hence embedding a normative 'who' in the 'how' to teach sexuality education.

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## Introduction

How best to teach young people about sex has engaged researchers, policymakers, professionals and civil society from across the political and religious spectrum (see Luker 2007). Kehily (2002, 121) argues that sexuality education is a 'complex and contested political issue, forming the backdrop to pedagogic practice'. For some, sexuality education is a controversial topic considered to advance adult views that rob children of their innocence (Robinson and Davies 2017). In the most demonising portrayals offered by anti-gender crusaders, sexuality education is described as a practice of 'sexualizing children' (Venegas 2022, 489). In Poland, right wing conservatives stigmatise teaching about sexuality and its educators of promoting 'gender ideology'<sup>1</sup> (Davies 2020, 17). Political regression in relation to gender equality, abortion, LGBT rights and sexuality education is not unique to Poland;

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instead, under the influence of right-wing populism ideas such as these are sweeping across the globe (see Bialystok et al. 2020, Corredor 2019).

Despite these regressive moves, research has clearly shown that knowledge about sex and sexuality does not harm children and that efforts to stop children learning about sexuality can lead to a harmful ignorance (Goldman 2008, 421). While some have argued that the provision of sexuality education may increase sexual activity among youth, research clearly shows the opposite and that knowledge instead helps promote a culture of safe sex and decreased sexual risk behaviour (see UNESCO 2018, Weaver, Smith, and Kippax 2005, Hayes, Burns, and Egan 2022). When young people are provided with good quality sexuality education they encounter opportunities to explore issues such as consent, mutuality and respect. In the process, they gain personal insights into what each of these concepts mean – both in general as well as within the context of sexual relationships (Reiss 2022).

Against this background, in this paper I aim to study the pedagogic backdrop to the provision of sexuality education and ask how age, gender and sexuality affect practices in the classroom and in schools. I focus on Sweden which tends to pride itself on being the first country in the world to make sexuality education a compulsory part of schooling. Over the years Swedish progressive sexual pedagogy has become a trademark and part of the country's foreign policy efforts to promote sexual and reproductive rights worldwide (Irwin 2019, Martinsson, Griffin, and Giritli Nygren 2016). In Sweden, sexuality education (like other work on discrimination, harassment and inclusion) is part of the national curriculum in K-12 schools. The aim is to provide knowledge about sexuality, consent and relationships but also to address issues of gender equality, honour violence, and pornography (see Skolverket 2021, 2022). Considered to be a core value in the national curriculum, the consequence is that every teacher working in Swedish schools is obliged to engage with sexuality education and discuss issues of gender, sexuality, consent and relationships.

### ***Doing age and gender***

To conceptualise and analyse intersections of age, gender and sexuality in the pedagogic practise of sexuality education, I turn to feminist theory. Joan Acker (1990, 2006, 2012) has argued that all organisations are gendered. According to her, social structures are produced and reproduced within the organisational logic of work. Through work, divisions and social categories become institutionalised since doing the job, also means *doing* gender. Acker argues that gender is not separate from other social structures and that class is 'constructed through gender', since 'class relations are always gendered' (Acker 1990, 145). This means that a focus on gender is not only useful in analysing the historical construction of sex but also in making sense of how gender is done as it intersects with other social categories such as age, sexuality and class. Informed by such a perspective, Acker (2006) argues that organisations function as inequality regimes since organisational practices within them reproduce inequalities based on gender and other social categories. Through body and work, femininity and masculinity are performed and given meaning in a way that naturalises notions of inequality both within the organisation and beyond.

In a similar vein, Clary Krekula (2021) argues that the working body not only naturalises gender and sexuality but also age. Similar to Ackers's notion of *doing* gender, age is also a *doing*

that is repeated and performed within organisations (Krekula et al. 2005, Krekula 2021). Rather than perceiving age to be the result of chronological development of life, age may be understood as the result of social processes within a given context. Krekula (2021) proposes:

We do age, among other things, by trying to adapt to age norms and age expectations, by judging both our own and other's actions based on age, or by trying to take advantage of, or limit ourselves, and others to, ideas about what is assumed to be appropriate for different age groups. (Krekula 2021, 61, translated by author)

In other words, *doing* gender is also a *doing* of age in which the individual embodies age by adjusting to the social ideals and expectations of different age groups across the lifespan. Krekula (2021) argues these *doings* are relational. In this view, 'young people' such as children and adolescents, are considered as 'not yet's' with their life ahead of them and lacking life experience. 'Older people' on the other hand are considered to be 'has beens' with their life behind them. Within organisations, 'young' or 'old' also mark distance to (or from) the normative working body. Similar to hegemonic categories within other hierarchical relationships, the normative body has the privilege of being unmarked and unnamed (Krekula 2021).

## Materials and methods

As indicated above, teachers in Swedish K-12 schools are expected to deal with issues of sexuality, consent and relationships in all of their classrooms (Skolverket 2021, 2022). However, how sexuality education is carried out varies between schools (Luthman 2018). To better understand this diversity, interviewees for this study were recruited via snowball through sampling using the author's personal networks (Bryman 2016).

As part of a larger study 21 individuals were interviewed. All were professionals engaged in different aspects of K-12 (6–18 years) school-based sexuality education. Of the 21 interviewees, 16 worked as teachers and 5 specialised in supporting schools' pedagogic practices on sexuality education at the time of data collection (2020–22). The interviewees worked in nine different cities across Sweden (6 in the capital city, 9 in large cities and 6 in smaller cities). Because data were collected during COVID-19 and its aftermath, all the interviews except one were conducted remotely via video or telephone depending on the interviewee's preference. Each interview lasted between 1 to 2.5 hours and was audio-recorded and transcribed.

From the total corpus of material the study generated, six interviews with teachers were selected because they explicitly addressed how teachers' age, gender and/or sexuality come to matter in the classroom.

## Ethical considerations

The project received approval by the Swedish Ethics Review Authority. In accordance with the authority's guidelines, all participants provided informed consent prior to the interview. To reduce the possibility of identification, participants were approached individually. To protect the integrity of the research participants and any individuals mentioned in the interviews, interviewees and the accounts they provided were anonymised. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article.

### ***Interviewing about and through memories***

In this study, I draw upon Frigga Haug's (1999, 2008) memory work as a means to access interviewees' experiences. Rather than being personal and subjective, Haug (2008) argues that memories are collective and mutable experiences that can point to the discursive and normative features of a society. Following Haug's (1999, 2008) line of reasoning, asking interviewees to share memories is a way of accessing to the discursive and normative aspects of how teachers (and other professionals) experience and navigate their practice.

At the beginning of the interview, interviewees were asked to give a brief account of their work-lives. They were then asked to share a memory from their practice of sexuality education. From this initial memory, the interview gradually developed to create a rich description of the interviewee's experience. In the course of the interviewee's stories, I discovered that despite working with different age groups, in different schools and in geographical locations, interviewees had broadly similar experiences of, for example, how sexuality education takes place both in formal teaching sessions and in ad-hoc interactions with students.

### ***A selection of stories***

As explained above, the analysis focused on six interviews selected because within them teachers explicitly engaged with issues of age, gender and/or sexuality in relation to their practice and the bodily experience of *doing* age and gender. According to Acker (1990), in the process of *gendering*, different conceptualisations intertwine and through repetition become meaningful social categories. By focusing on the interviews that explicitly addressed *doings as gendered practices*, it becomes possible to gain insight into how age, gender and sexuality come to matter in teaching practices.

While 15 out of 21 interviewees provided slightly less explicit accounts of age, gender and/or sexuality, the silences they contain may be considered part of the gendered pedagogical backdrop as well. Krekula (2021) describes how normative bodies have the privilege of remaining unmarked and unnamed in social settings. In this sense, not recognising or categorising oneself as gendered implies alignment with what can be considered to be experiences of the normative teaching body in school. In this paper, I do not analyse these silences of the normative teaching body but instead focus on more explicit experiences of age, gender and sexuality.

### **Findings**

Each of the interview excerpts focused upon in this paper departs from a binary understanding of gender and heteronormativity. Because of this, it crucial to put them into dialogue with previous scholarly work to develop a useful explanation of how heteronormative assumptions about age, gender and sexuality relate to one another thereby creating pedagogical possibilities and limitations.

In the first example below, age and gender are used to explain how an 'older' female teacher can acquire authority when discussing issues of sexuality and relationships with students. In the second example, I show how female teachers may use their (hetero)sexual life-course as a pedagogical resource as part of their pedagogical practice. The final

example shows how male teachers' everyday *doing* of age, gender and sexuality can arouse suspicion, while the explicit use of a norm-critical pedagogy can allow male teachers to enact safe(r) forms of masculinity when engaging in sexuality education.

### ***Age and authority – the advantage of being an “older” female teacher in sexuality education***

Eva has worked as a 7–9 grade science teacher in a small city in the north of Sweden for the past 20 years. During the interview, she suddenly began to talk about how her age and gender becomes a resource for her in teaching sexuality education. She said, 'I get a lot for free because I'm an older woman'. As I understood Eva, getting 'a lot for free' was a description of an experience of how she benefited from something compared to her other colleagues. She explained,

[...] I've heard from other students that they think it's easier if it's [from] a *tant* [auntie], like me, because I'm neutral. Do you understand? I am like a mother figure to many of these. [students]. (Eva)

In using the Swedish word *tant*, Eva described how she was perceived by students. According to Eva, being a *tant* made her more approachable and helped avoid some of the tensions that can arise when students want to discuss issues of consent, sexuality and relationships. She continued:

There is nothing embarrassing about me. They don't have to be afraid of me; I have no male authority. I think they see me very much as a type of mother figure, so they dare to ask. (Eva)

In describing herself as a *tant* and a mother figure, Eva presents her body as an accessible neutral phenomenon. By means of being this neutral motherly figure, she conveys a non-judgemental attitude towards students and the questions they might ask. In contrast to male teachers, Eva describes how she, as a *tant*, lacks male authority, making it easier for students to approach her.

That said, a *tant* is not without authority. Eva described how she does not hesitate to call out students when they are silly. In interview, Eva recalled how one of her female colleagues, a school counsellor, had been discussing pornography with the students when one of the male students asked what happens if a girl stops breathing during strangulation sex. According to Eva, her colleague overinterpreted the student's question and as a result overreacted to the situation. In her view, this particular student was taking advantage of the situation to test the school counsellor rather than pose a serious question. Eva said that this can happen when a situation becomes embarrassing for students or if the students do not have a good relationship with the person who is teaching sexuality education.

She went on to explain that if the same student had asked her the question, she would have started by replying [in an amused voice] 'Well, what do you think?!' to demonstrate that she was not fooled by the ploy. Eva also explained that she did not always answer students' questions immediately. Instead, she asks about each question to identify whether the student is being frivolous or whether the question is an attempt to reach out and build trust. By questioning the students' intention in asking, Eva exercises a form of professional authority derived from her experience working with a particular student.

To understand Eva's practice and her embodiment of a *tant*, it is important to recognise the cultural meanings associated with being a *tant*. Like many linguistic figurations, the meaning of *tant* is contextually given. Lövgren (2013) explains there is no immediate equivalent to the word in English, but it could be something similar to *auntie*. While *tant* implies a certain age (an 'older' female), the meaning of *tant* is ambiguous as it both symbolises an outdated and desexualised type of femininity while simultaneously representing a robust and sometimes rebellious figure (Lövgren 2013).

Similar to other representations of women, the *tant* is a somewhat fragile figure who lacks control and autonomy in the world (Martin 1992). Bremmer and Wennman (2011) describes how the Swedish *tant* was constructed during and after the second world war to denote a generation of women who had never experienced youth. Instead of building womanhood around a youthful femininity, the female ideals of the *tant* are those of duty, usefulness and matriarchal homemaking. Today, the *tant* has been reshaped to represent a radical female form of social wellbeing, which simultaneously symbolises a lost time of strong morals and sound ethical principles (Liliequist and Lövgren 2012).

The radical strength of the *tant* was also part of Eva's experience. In interview, she described how students often thanked her for having the courage to address difficult and sometimes embarrassing issues as part of sexuality education, while retaining hope in love and relationships regardless of a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. Eva's practices as part of sexuality education can be considered to be what Bengtsson and Bolander (2019) describe as inclusive norm-critical pedagogy. Without hesitating, Eva engages with sexuality education and uses her authority to disrupt underlying cis-normative assumptions about gender, sexuality, love and hope.

Embodied in the figure of the *tant*, Eva's intersections of age and gender elide to provide the *tant* with approachability and authority whilst avoiding the embarrassment students may feel when discussing issues of sexuality, consent and relationships. This experience contrasts with Goldschmidt-Gjerløw's (2022) study of Norwegian teachers in which older female teachers were less likely to engage with challenging topics such as harassment and abuse as part of sexuality education.

### ***Lived experience – the (hetero)sexual female lifecourse as a resource for sexuality education***

In the previous section, the *tant's* age and gender were described as conferring on her an authority in the student-teacher relationship in sexuality education. Apart from embodying a particular type of radical femininity, the *tant* also conveys a de-sexualised femininity (Lövgren 2013). During interview, Eva stated, '[. . .] there is nothing sexual about me'. In her description, being a *tant* is a *doing* of age and gender in which sexuality appears as something in the distant past, a sexual "has been" that is not sexual anymore.

Despite Eva's description of herself as a *tant*, students were aware of her being a sexual person. According to Eva, students were curious and wanted to know about her personal life. To illustrate this type of conversation, Eva impersonated one of her students:

[Student in a childish voice]: Are you married, Eva?

[Eva]: Yes

[Student in a childish voice]: What's the name of the person you're married to?

[Eva]: John

[Student in a childish voice]: Oh, so it's a man

[Eva]: Yes

[giggly laughter]

For the students, Eva was a heterosexual married woman with children and grandchildren. The giggly laughter of the students' inquiry reveals an innocent dialogue between a teacher and her students. However, the dialogue also exemplifies how a *tant* has become a knowledgeable and desexualised subject as the result of following a normative life course (Krekula 2021, Krekula, Närvänen, and Näsman 2005). In teaching sexuality education these experiences function as a way of legitimising her teaching. Eva explained that being a 'young' teacher can be challenging since they may lack the experiences of, for example, giving birth, having children or even having a relationship. Eva said:

I had a female colleague once, [...] she was a Christian, she was 20 years old, and she thought this [sexuality education] was the worst thing she had ever done. The kids took advantage of this, so they took the opportunity to ask her personal questions [...] it may have been curiosity because they felt close in age, but at the same time, they took it for granted that she must have been involved in [sexual] things, but that was not the case.

According to Eva, being 'young' can be a disadvantage when teaching about sexuality and relationships. In contrast to being a sexual 'has been', Eva's description of 'young' refers to a category of teachers considered to be sexual 'not yet's' who lack the experiences that 'older' teachers have (Krekula, Närvänen, and Näsman 2005). However, despite being 'young', a female teacher can have sexual experiences to lean upon. Following Krekula, Närvänen, and Näsman (2005), being young has less to do with chronological age than acquiring expected life experiences. In this way, being young in chronological age is not always a disadvantage.

This is exemplified by Lisa, a 7th-9th grade science teacher in a small city in southern Sweden. In interview Lisa described herself as a 'young' teacher since she was only a few years older than the students when she began to work. Being new to the job, Lisa was both young in experience and young in age. At the time of interview some years after she first began teaching, Lisa was still 'young' and explained that the students often tested her abilities to teach by asking her what she thought about sex and relationships. Lisa explained that when this happens, she stayed calm and replied that she thinks it is fun to teach sexuality education because sexuality is relevant to everyone. According to Lisa, by responding in this way, the students become more serious about the subject. In her teaching, Lisa does not deny the closeness in age. Instead, she explained that she '[...] jokes with them and says that, you know, we are kind of the same generation and yet I have no idea how you behave on social media? [laughs]'. According to Lisa, she makes use of the relatively small age gap between herself and the students by swapping love stories with them. As part of their sexuality education, she asks students to create a fictional love story while she shares with them how it was for her when she was a nervous 8th grader going to school dances in a larger city, the pressure of kissing and making out, and how the whole school once ended up with glandular fever. Lisa



explained that the students can sometimes be quite shocked by how it was to be a teenager when she grew up, but ‘think it’s fun to listen to’.

The use of personal experience of sexuality was also something Maria, a 7th-9th grade science teacher in a different small city in the south of Sweden, described. At her school, Maria had noticed the prevalence of homophobic behaviour amongst the students, and she felt she needed to do something unexpected to make the students reflect on their harmful and discriminatory behaviour. Maria explained that the students saw her as a heterosexual person but to make the students think twice, she told the students how she had fallen in love with a woman when she was ‘younger’. By talking about her unexpected same-sex love, Maria explained that she is able to stress the importance of not making assumptions about someone’s sexuality. Her intervention provided an entry point from which to discuss how people cannot choose who they fall in love with. Maria explained that at first, she had hesitated about sharing her personal story because she did not know if it might trigger negative consequences, but in hindsight, it did not. Instead, Maria explained that ‘I think the students became a bit curious about who I am [laughs]’. Although she could be sure of cause and effect, she noticed there has been much less use of homophobic language among the students since she shared her story.

While previous research has questioned the importance of the educators’ age and gender in student perceptions of who was a good sexuality educator (Allen 2009), these interviews exemplify how teachers’ doing of age, gender and sexuality comes to matter when teaching. Despite being an ‘old’ or a ‘young’ teacher, female teachers can draw on their sexual experiences of (hetero)sexual life to exercise authority when it comes to discussing issues of sexuality and relationships. By doing so, female teachers can use their embodied experiences of ‘womanhood’ as pedagogical resources with which to disrupt normative assumptions about sexuality. However, by making use of their own experience and fulfilling the heterosexual contract (see Butler 1988), female teachers also reinforce a ‘culture of heteronormativity’ in school (Davis and Hay 2018, 291). And, as we will see in the next section, this has consequences for their male counterparts.

### ***Doing safe masculinity***

While (hetero)sexual female teachers can use their experiences of sex and love to gain authority in their teaching, male teachers do not have the same benefits. Eva described the situation as follows:

I know many male teachers who have experienced that ... as they’ve got older, it’s been easier ... but it’s difficult for men. They get some kind of label, I think. That they are more fixated on sex than women [...]. It’s tougher, yes. They [male teachers] have it much, much tougher. They [male teachers] have to choose their words carefully before they can say them, while I, as a *tant* feel that I am neutral.

The assumptions about male teachers that Eva describes relate to what Davis and Hay (2018) identify as the discourse of risk and sexuality, although their study concerned primary schools in which any adult can become an ‘object of unease’ (Davis and Hay 2018, 289). In theorising gender and age, or perhaps more specifically, ageing and masculinity, Sandberg (2011) emphasises how Judith Butler’s notion of gender as the performative

enactment of sex and age is disturbed by the ageing body. This could explain Eva's statement about how it may be easier for 'older' men to teach sexuality education.

Despite sexuality education becoming easier to teach as male teachers becomes 'older', Eva describes how male teachers are at greater risk than her. As a *tant*, she is neutral, whereas male teachers are not. To understand the special challenges associated with being a male teacher, I turn to the experiences of three interviewees. Marcus who had worked with all age groups in school in a large city central Sweden explained that although teaching about sexuality, consent and relationships was difficult for everyone, he thought, 'It's more sensitive for guys to talk about it, even though it shouldn't be, but it probably is'. Marcus elaborated as follows:

[. . .] You have to understand what kind of signals you send out. I am a man, I'm 40 years old, and along comes a 15-year-old girl and asks how she is going to have sex with her boyfriend. It can send out the wrong signals somehow. [. . .] Personally, I wouldn't care about it because I don't see it that way, but it is there in other people's minds and in society, and therefore you have to deal with it

Marcus describes how even if students want to have a personal conversation with him, he cannot freely engage in it. Instead, he has to guard himself to prevent anyone from getting the wrong impression.

Julian, who worked as an upper secondary biology teacher in a larger city in the south of Sweden, recalled an experience when the students made him aware of how they perceived him as a heterosexual cisgender man. Julian described how he was working in a class in which students were very open about their sexualities and gender identities. At one point, Julian decided to test their openness by asking them 'Can I be queer?'. He remembers how the whole class went quiet and exchanged glances before one of the students replied in an educating tone: 'Julian, [pause], you are not queer'. Julian laughed when he retold the story and explained that while there was openness among the students, this did not include him. To his surprise, his students assumed him to be a heterosexual cisgender man.

While Julian had imagined his students might be a bit more open-minded about the idea that he also could be queer, his story provides an example of how teachers' sexual identity is conditioned by a 'culture of heteronormativity' (Davis and Hay 2018, 291). In Julian's story, the *doing* of heterosexuality belongs to a school culture of heterosexuality that is not only practised in the teachers *doing*, but also supported by students. As Davis and Hay (2018, 290) point out, the 'straight face of schooling' is also connected to safety as heterosexuality is regarded as neutral and non-sexual, whereas anything else is considered sexual.

The practice of performing a safe masculinity to prevent suspicion (Davis and Hay 2018) was also noticeable in Fredrik's story. Fredrik has worked as a civics teacher in an upper secondary school in a small city in the south of Sweden. When discussing issues of sexuality, Fredrik described how he tries to frame the conversation by creating a comfortable entry point for himself. In order to discuss issues of sexuality and relationships, he directs the students' attention towards an image or the media. Fredrik explained that he can sometimes be very direct in his approach and use provocative images to invite students to think out aloud with him. Inspired by these images, both teacher and class

discuss bodies, sexualities and norms. Fredrik described how his students perceive him to be someone they can relate to and talk to.

I think the students feel that I can still relate in a certain way, that I'm not 60 years old and have no idea at all about their world. [...] I don't think that the students perceive me as particularly outdated, and they feel comfortable talking to me about it because ... well, I'm not judgemental. (Fredrik)

For Fredrik, being a teacher that students can talk to is showing that he is being able to relate to young people's everyday lives. According to Fredrik, it is important to have a sense of what is going on for young people and not be too judgemental. Fredrik compared himself to an 'older' male colleague and explained:

He was very knowledgeable in his subjects [biology] but I think he barely addresses anything about sexual knowledge other than this is biology, and when it comes to that, I think the students have a pretty decent grasp of [it] anyway. (Fredrik)

According to Fredrik, the students experience little room for discussion with his 'older' male colleague and the discussions they do have are awkward. This colleague's less interactive style makes the students feel the 'older' teacher is embarrassed and too stiff in his approach. While Fredrik's 'older' colleague avoids the subject of sex, he is also considered to be a 'has been' in his approach to sexuality education (see Krekula, Närvänen, and Näsman 2005). In contrast, Fredrik feels students respond well to his teaching as he lives up to the expected practice (see Skolverket 2021, 2022).

Similar to Fredrik, Marcus described how sexuality requires much more than teaching about the biological body. Instead, he thinks that it should open up conversation about sexuality so that students can relate it to their lives and make better sense of what is around them. Marcus explains that when it comes to sexuality education, 'nothing is a taboo' because 'if we [the school] do not talk about [for example] anal sex, it will become the most interesting [thing] ever'. Marcus explains that having in-depth conversations with students is important to create a safe environment for all students because otherwise, they may never know how their behaviour affects other people.

While all the male interviewees found it important to engage with sexuality education, they did so by organising their teaching around safe(r) forms of masculinity. In contrast to the female teachers, men's experience of their bodies cannot be used as a pedagogical resource to discuss issues of sexuality, consent and relationships. Instead, attention must be deflected away from their sexuality, their bodies and their personal experiences, using starting points such as events in society or young people's social lives in order to discuss various issues of sexuality. In contrast to previous studies of norm-critical sexuality education (see, for example, Bengtsson and Bolander 2019), male interviewees in this study did engage their students in norm-critical analysis of sexuality, relationships and society through in-depth discussion with students.

## Discussion

By exploring teachers experiences of embodying age, gender and sexuality, this study addresses how sexuality education does not only emerge from intended teaching strategies but also from gendered structures as they affect how differently aged, gendered, and

sexualised bodies can approach issues of sexuality and relationships. Although this study only accounts for a few of the experiences that teachers have, it sheds new insight to the role of the teaching bodies in sexuality education. Findings show how both male and female teachers organise their teaching in relation to normative expectations of age, gender and sexuality. By utilising experiences from an expected life-course, female teachers mobilise normative notions of age, gender and sexuality to address and challenge normative assumptions about gender, sexuality and relationships. In contrast, male teachers, regardless of age, are conditioned to *doing* safer forms of masculinity. In particular, through the use of norm-critical pedagogy, male teachers can engage with sexuality education by directing the focus away from their bodies and onto external issues of gender, sexuality and relationships. To teach sexuality education in this way, male teachers rely on an up-to-date view of society in order to discuss issues of sexuality, consent and relationships whereas female teachers can draw on their experiences of ‘womanhood’.

To understand these findings, it is necessary to recognise how both contemporary and past ideals in sexuality education in Sweden have centred in the practice of talking sex (see Lindgren and Backman Prytz 2021, Bengtsson and Bolander 2019). Developments and practices in sexuality education are grounded in socio-political history (Sherlock 2012). In Sweden, the development of sexuality education is strongly associated with the earlier half of the 1900s pioneering female figures, or *tanter*.

One of these figures was Karolina Widerström (1856-1949) who argued that sexuality education should seek to demystify the nature of sexual reproduction (Widerström 1903). Through her teaching and writing, Widerström later added gender to a previously genderless human body (see Lindgren 2018, Thorsén 2021), but she also used her womanhood to inform other women about the remarkable female body and its role in reproduction (see Widerström 1903). Another important *tant* at the beginning of the 1900s was the activist Elise Ottesen-Jensen, the founder of *Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning* (RFSU) [the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education]. In addition to acknowledging the importance of biological knowledge for understanding the reproductive body, Ottesen-Jensen travelled widely across Sweden agitating for openness in talk about sex, desire and sexual pleasure so that people would have greater agency in their sexual lives (Lennerhed 2002).

Due to this groundwork, making sexuality education a compulsory part of schooling in 1955 was not the result of a controversial decree by the state, but simply involved the recognition of an already widespread practice (Lennerhed 1994). Their way of talking about sex in a natural way, giving clear answers to the questions asked, and adopting a matter-of-fact approach were advocated in teachers’ guides as far back as the 1940s (Lennerhed 1994).

Although Widerström and Ottesen-Jensen were not alone in promoting sexuality education, these two *tanter* came to symbolise sexuality education and a ‘Swedish way’ of talking about sex with young people. Through an unbroken chain of teacher guidance and open-minded curricula the practice of sexuality education in Sweden created its own history of talking sex in school.

## Conclusion

While norm-critical pedagogy currently constitutes best practice in Swedish sexuality education, findings from this study confirm how the ‘teaching body’ (the teacher that

is) is expected to embody a (hetero)sexual life-course. In consequence, female teachers, and especially 'older' female teachers who have followed a normative life course are placed in a position of strength whereas male teachers are restricted by normative expectations of their sex when discussing issues of sexuality, consent and relationships. Viewing the teacher's body as a pedagogical device in Swedish sexuality education shows how dominant forms of femininity work to ensure schools remain protected spaces for heteronormativity.

Although this is not clearly stated in this article, these stereotypical images of a teaching body have also been shaped by particular notions of class, whiteness and ableness. By shedding light upon a few of the features of the teaching body, this article accentuates how bodily norms are embedded in schooling, hence showing that there is a normative 'who' in the 'how' to teach sexuality education.

## Note

1. According to Davies (2020, 17) gender ideology is 'a vague term designed to conflate often quite unrelated issues including LGBT rights, abortion and paedophilia'.

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