

A solution, but what is the problem? – Contemplating the problem-solving ethos in Sexuality Education

This paper plays around with the idea of how policy, as a solution, are dependent on ‘problems’ to justify their own existence, thus requiring a process of problem-making after a policy is printed. In this paper I explore how a policy reform in sexuality education, a subject defined by dealing with ‘problems’, get public acceptance by adhering to new constructions of problems, thus replacing previous notions of the ‘problem’.

Introduction

Using sexuality education (SE) to solve different social problems has become a defining discourse to explain what SE *does*. Despite differences in development between countries (Zimmerman, 2015), the European Expert Group on Sexuality Education states that “[t]he focus of sexuality education has changed in line with the educational and public health priorities of the time, but most key elements have stayed the same” (2016, p. 427). Global organizations aiming to solve problems related to sex and sexuality produce policies and programs claiming SE “plays a central role in the preparation of young people for a safe, productive, fulfilling life” since it is a “world where HIV and AIDS, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unintended pregnancies, gender-based violence (GBV) and gender inequality still pose serious risks to their well-being” (UNESCO, 2018, p. 1), while others claim SE to be “one of the most important tools to ensure that young people have the information they need to make healthy and informed choices” (Parker et al., 2009, p. 227). In research and policy, SE appear to be a solution to prevent and solve a multitude of various social problems. But if solving and preventing problems is the very core and purpose of sexuality education, I think it is suitable to ask how policies and educational programs ‘knows’ what problems to solve?

In response to this simple, yet important question, this paper, without denying the importance of SE, considers how the problem-solving ethos is discursively constructed and underpinned through problematisations. By paying attention to the process of how policy come to make sense in the public eye, I aim to explore how problematisations functions as a soothing

technique of acceptance. In this paper, I depart from a policy that is already produced, thus targeting the aftermath of policy to analyse the discursive formation of social problems and its entanglements with SE. By doing so I show how policy come to make sense through problematisations of sexuality. In this paper I ask, *what problematisations emerges to justify the policy? How are they constructed, and which social subject do they reproduce?* (← these questions will not be fully answered in this paper but hopefully in a full article)

Sexuality education

For some reason, problems seem to fuel the very existence of the intervention of SE. On a policy level, SE has been part of Swedish schooling since 1942 (Lennerhed, 2002; SOU, 1974), and compulsory for all pupils since 1955 (Sherlock, 2012; SOU, 1974). In practice has it been placed under various school subjects but most consistently taught in biology (Ceder et al., 2021). In the 1994s curricula, SE was reorganised into a subject-integrated knowledge area where each subject cover parts of sexuality and relationships (Läroplaner, 1994).

Although it is secured on a policy level and publicly supported since its very beginning, it has also received public critique (Ivanova, 2008; SOU, 1974), that has forced it to change in accordance. For example, a year after the Government declared SE to be an important part of schooling in 1942, the first official teachers' guidance was in print. This could be cause for celebration, but due to a public debate criticizing the guidance moralistic views on marriage, the guidance was both retracted and revised. In the debate, newspapers, experts, and opinion makers considered the guidance to promote an outdated view on sexual abstinence until marriage. Instead of continuing the path recommended by the expert committee, the revised guidance shifted its message to downplay its moralistic ambition and judgment on families and sexual life (Lennerhed, 2002; SOU, 1974, p. 109).

The close relationship between SE and problems is also present in historical accounts. Descriptions of how SE developed in Europe and the US tell how radicals and reformers in the late 19th century and early 20st century argued SE to be key in preventing 'urban decay', stemming out of sexual ignorance among men and women. Social problems of venereal diseases, prostitution, unintended pregnancies, and low sexual morals were most urgent as they threatened the social body (Hustak, 2013; Lennerhed, 2002; Luker, 2007; Moran, 1996).

Surrounded by problems, influential actors and social movements saw a common goal in uplifting society and therefore join forces on a broad scale to support SE as means to combat and prevent social problems and reassure a sociosexual order (Lennerhed, 2002; Luker, 2007; Zimmerman, 2015). Since then, SE has gradually developed from preventing unintended pregnancy and spreading sexually transmitted diseases to a more comprehensive approach to sexuality, relationships, and human-rights. From the 1980s and onwards, SE focused on also raising awareness about sexual abuse, and preventing sexism, homophobia, and online bullying, but also to increase students' capability to analyse gender norms and reflect upon gender inequality (Education", 2016).

The problems SE is appointed to solve are comprehensive and political, intersecting gender, age, and sexuality, but also religious views and cultural contexts. International programs and policies to promote comprehensive SE often claims it to be an important mean to promote universal human rights of sexual and reproductive freedom (see BZgA, 2010; UNESCO, 2018). But in doing so, Rasmussen (2015) argues them to be guided by political influence of secularism which cultivate the assumed position of neutrality. Critical studies of curricula show SE to produce specific discourses on the ideal sexual life (Roien et al., 2022), which sometimes adhere to neoliberal discourses of individualism and sometimes to shared responsibilities and obligations (Lamb & Randazzo, 2016). But as Lamb and Randazzo (2016) point out, does the inconsistency in SE open for new possibilities to move towards complex ethical conversations that can inform understandings and actions as a sociosexual being.

Methodology

In addressing problems SE aims to solve, there is a need to make a clear distinction of the analytical levels of the problems at hand. Carol Bacchi (2009) explains that when social problems appear on a policy level, they become representations of real-life problems, rather than the actual problem itself. In becoming a 'problem' for policies to solve, real-life problems undergo a process of detachment. Knight (2010, p. 133) argues that problems in policies "create a reality that is rational, objective, seamless, and which taps into the sensibilities of national popular consciousness" which leaves them open for interpretation. Rather than being real-life problems, problems in policies are social constructions that represent

a real-life problem (Bacchi, 2009). Hence, using quotation marks around ‘problems’ emphasize this process of detachment.

In being a discursive product, Bacchi argues that any attempt to solve a ‘problem’ is partly creating the problem at hand, because it is part of framing an understanding of what the ‘problem’ *is* (Bletsas, 2012). Through policy, the public is governed through problematizations in which several actors from various fields of knowledge, expertise, and professionals are involved in the problem-making process. This means that ‘problems’ in policies are the result of discursive struggles over competing representations to define what the problem *is*.

To explore how ‘problems’ work as a soothing technique of acceptance, I work with Bacchi’s (Bacchi, 2016; Bacchi, 2009) What’s the Problem-approach (WPR) to notice how particular forms of subjectivity become constituted in problematisations (Bletsas, 2012, p. 22) and why certain changes take place while others do not (Bacchi, 2009). To explore this process, I make use of the media discourse on the policy reform of sexuality education in Sweden. The empirical material consists of (1) a public announcement of how the Government introduce a new degree objective in teacher education to improve SE in schools from the 3rd of September 2020, and (2) a debate article by the Minister of Higher Education and Research from 11th of September 2020, and (3) a selection of 20 newspaper articles¹ that represent how the reform was discussed in the press between the 3rd and 11th of September 2020.

Findings

Below I briefly account for the findings to show how the analysis unfolds.

A ‘Problem’ prior to policy - The ‘problem’ to solve

On September 3rd 2020 the Government announced a new degree objective in teacher education to “ensure prospective teachers to have the competence to teach about sex and relationships” (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020a, my translation). The message was clear, SE in schools needed improvement because teachers were ill prepared to teach about sexuality and

¹ Eight news articles, five editorials, five reports, and two debate articles. All the articles were published in different mediums; three national newspapers, seven local newspapers, two online newspapers, one Christian national newspaper, one a public radio channel, one teacher’s union magazine, and a national television channel. Although the publishing place represent different platforms, all articles are text-based and in Swedish. All excerpts are translated into English by me.

relationships. According to the announcement, reviews of SE show that “many teachers find it difficult to teach about sex and relationships and that more education is needed” (ibid). By targeting the degree objective, the teacher students develop new skills that allow them to grapple questions about identity, sexuality, and relationships to ensure every pupil right to good education.

In the announcement, the policy’s solution is staked out to be the reform of the degree objectives as a long-term solution to the problem of sexuality education. By focusing on the teacher students’ knowledge and skills, the ‘problems’ in school-based SE will be solved. But what are the ‘problems’ to solve then? In the announcement, the ‘problem’ of SE is mainly the teachers since they are ill prepared to teach, hence making it impossible for SE to reach its own measurements. The ‘problem teacher’ fails to ensure a good education for all students and therefore it becomes the reformatory subject of the policy.

Prior to the policy had the government ordered a quality review of SE by the *Swedish School Inspectorate* (2018). In the report, principals and teachers at 450 randomly selected schools (compulsory school, compulsory special school, upper secondary school, and upper secondary special school) were asked to fill out questionnaires while 28 schools were closely reviewed through interviews. After analysing the data, the Inspectorate reported that it was “a great need for competence development” (p. 5). Amongst other things, teachers needed more competence in the knowledge area in general, but they were also in need of specialized knowledge about norms, LGBTQ, and honour-related issues, as well as knowledge about how to teach SE to immigrant students, and how to deal with controversial issues related to sexuality education. According to the report, teachers revealed a sense of unease in teaching sexuality education. The teachers felt uncomfortable, not up to date, and insecure about how to handle discussions that contradicted curricular school values. But the teachers also self-reported that they lacked knowledge in specific topics such as sexual identity and sexual orientation. The report concluded that the teachers ‘insecurities’ was key, because it dictated whether SE was given according to the prescribed model of subject integration and reoccurrence that allow for a comprehensive and systematic SE to take place. Therefore, the problem SE needed to solve, was to increase the ‘problem teachers’ lack of skill and knowledge by adding more SE in teacher education.

In between ‘problems’

After the announcement, a total of 230 articles discussed the reform and its ability to solve the problem. Although most of the articles welcomed the objective, there was less consensus on the image of the ‘problem teacher’.

Without forming an opinion on the new policy, teachers’ magazine *Läraren.se* published Twitter comments to a teacher union representatives’ question, “*Does somebody know if there is anything left for parents to be responsible for and not the school?*”. The ironic tone in was echoed in some responses claiming “*Yep, the child-making itself are parents responsible for. There we drew a line at our school. But otherwise, there is not much left*”, while others took on a more serious tone emphasising schools role to ensure everyone’s right to good education (Olsson, 2020). Instead of reproducing the image of the ‘problem teacher’, the passive-aggressive tone on twitter shed light on the working conditions of teachers and development of the school body. In skewing the narrative of the ‘problem teacher’, a local newspaper emphasised that “*To constantly assign new, current societal problems for teachers to crack, neither solve the lack of knowledge that has affected the Swedish school or the societal problems you want to access*”(Murguz, 2020). Regional newspaper *Sydsvenskan* takes on a similar path and argues “*It is easy to want to expand the role of teacher, but too high expectations lead to disappointment*”.

In support of the teachers, a politician in the school council comment by proclaiming that “*we have skilled teachers, but they need new tools. That is why I am glad that the government today makes the decision* (Erlandsson, 2020). Through the politicians praising, the policy is accepted while the image of the ‘problem teacher’ is partly deflected. Instead of focusing on what teachers cannot do, the article begin to describe other ‘problems’ that are underpinned by other sources than the quality review of the *Swedish School Inspectorate*. In the article the problems are voiced through the commentary from two politicians. According to one of them, a “*modern and updated sexuality education*” is necessary to “*break the unacceptable development*”. Based on the results from a local survey, a report from the police, and testimonies from a midwife, a new set of ‘problems’ arise. Instead of reproducing the ‘problem teacher’, the new problematisations revolves around (a) how young women are pressured into sex, (b) the increase of sugar dating and prostitution during the Covid-19 pandemic, (c) older men’s’ ruthless sexual exploitation of youths, (d) robberies among young men, and (e) normalization of narcotics use. The turn towards other sources to underpin the problem representation makes

it possible for the politicians to shy away from the ‘problem teacher’, that most likely is a subject working in their municipality, and instead move towards problems, policies and actions that favour to the politicians works.

In the light of the policy, the politicians problematisation appear to be new. But by paying attention to how ‘problems’ come about (Bacchi, 2009) I notice how the midwife, appear as a source of knowledge in seven different articles (see Erlandsson, 2020; Eskilsson, 2020; Irenius, 2020; Larsen, 2020; Olsson, 2020; Sjölin, 2020; TT/Aftonbladet, 2020). According to the midwife, rough sex has become mainstream in society and “*many young people use porn as a main source of information and inspiration*”. Pornography should not be the first source of knowledge for young people, but since SE is insufficient, the midwife suggest to replace teachers with someone, like midwives, because they want to talk about sexuality and has the proper knowledge to do so (Larsen, 2020).

Despite the midwife critical tone towards SE, she and the articles find the new reform to be a positive change of policy. In describing the ‘problems’ the reform will solve, other problematisations also emerges. In correspondence to the midwife’s testimony and problematisation of rough sex and pornography. *Aftonbladet* describes how the testimony from the midwife has cast a light upon youths feeling expected to participate in rough sex and that several media outlets report young people to be physically and mentally harmed during sex. An editorial columnist adds a Youtube documentary about how porn harm young men into numbing them into a depression-like state where they in the worst case, young men become unable to have erections (Sjölin, 2020). Another editorial columnist emphasizes the ‘problem of pornography’ by refer to the Youtube documentary and the midwife, but also referring to (a) a study, stating that boys begin to search for porn at the age of 12, and that “41 percent of young men age 16-29 watch porn daily or several days a week”, (b) testimonies from a girl who has interviewed other youths claim rough porn inspired sex to be the new normal, and (c) the spread of internet pornography and usage of porn-filters (Irenius, 2020). In the articles, rough sex, sexual injuries, pornography, and easy access to pornography arise as new problematisations overshadowing the ‘problem teacher’.

To be continued.... But I can reveal that the ‘problematic teacher’ does appear again, but slightly reframed to mirror the unrealistic expectations on teachers. The problem of pornography is also re-framed through a humoristic twist that point towards the problem of

having idea-driven organisations going around asking children and youths if they watch pornography.

Same solution, new ‘problems’

On September 11th, eight days after the first announcement, the Minister for Higher Education and Research addressed the reform in a debate article in *Gefle Dagblad*. Instead of focusing on the ‘problem teacher’ the Minister declares “*Young girls and boys should receive their sexuality education from school, not from the porn industry*”. Therefore “*we make knowledge about sex and relationships mandatory for future teachers*” (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020b). The Minister continues and argues pornography create “*an unreasonable and skewed picture of sex and relationships that harm our young people, both mentally and physically*” and that they have received reports on “*mental and physical injuries that have arisen after young people have had hard porn-inspired sex*”.

In the debate article, the ‘problem teacher’ is still there, but is now framed as an important figure in school to “*counterweight*” pornography, bring knowledge about the body, sex, and relationships in everyday interactions with young people by being “*better equipped to problematize porn, gender norms, sexual abuse and the effects of vulnerability*”, and ensuring that “*everyone gets this important knowledge with them into adulthood and into future relationships*” (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2020b).

Conclusion

I have explored how problematisations functions as a soothing technique of acceptance by paying attention towards how policy come to make sense in the public eye. Although I cannot guarantee that the Minister altered their message in announcing the reform to adhere to public discussion, the analysis does reveal a discursive battle of problematisations.

Despite putting forth a ‘problem’ in the shape of a teacher without sufficient skills and knowledge, the public reject this problematisation. Instead, alternative problematisations emerged to justify the policy reform. Underpinned by other sources of knowledge and information than the Government had used, and based on other assumptions about school, teachers, and youths the most pressing social problems was portrayed to be pornography and

the normalisation of rough sex. In this configuration, the ‘problem teacher’ became redefined into being an important subject to counterweight youths’ unrealistic image of sexuality and expectations on sex. As an invention to solve problems, sexuality education, was never threatened by the shift in problematisations. However, in cultivating an ethos of being a problem-solver, the discursive reframing of the ‘problem’ makes one wonder if developments in sexuality education rather tells the story of hegemonic power than progression.

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