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ABSTRACT

This article examines the tactical (counter) politics of inclusive and ‘norm-critical’ approaches in Swedish sex education, focusing on how teachers interpret and negotiate the possibilities and pitfalls of this kind of work. The analysis draws on participant observation in sex education practices and in-service teacher training, as well as interviews with educators. Three recurrent strategies lie at the centre of the analysis: the sensitive use of language to achieve inclusion; the organisation and incorporation of ‘sensitive’ content to resist stigmatisation; and the use of different modalities to produce a specific knowledge order. The analysis shows how these strategies are grounded in norm-critical ideals, which become partly conflicted with tensions and discomforts when acted out in practice. The analysis further shows how an inclusive and norm-critical agenda runs the risk of becoming static, in the sense of providing students with the results of critique rather than engaging them in it.

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Introduction

Sex education has a long tradition in Sweden, although both the content and the overall framing have shifted. In recent years, the policy and practice of school-based sex education have taken a significant turn towards inclusion – in the sense of social justice and rights for individuals and groups – and anti-discrimination. An important part of this shift is that since 2006 children and pupils have had legal protection against discrimination, harassment and other degrading treatment on the basis of sex, transgender identity or expression, ethnicity, religion or other belief, disability, sexual orientation and age (SFS 2006:67, later replaced by SFS 2008:567; SFS 2010:800). Moreover, in the national curriculum statements for elementary and secondary school from 2011 onwards (SNAE 2011a, 2011b), issues of sexuality, identity and equality have been given a significant status extending over several parts of the syllabus, in order to strengthen sex education as an interdisciplinary and subject-integrated knowledge area. These curricula are further accompanied by a series of national guidance materials for sex education, which underline new approaches in the field. In particular, critical approaches towards norms and constructions of normality in terms of ‘norm-critical’ perspectives are
put forward as a way to achieve successful sex education in terms of inclusiveness and anti-discrimination (see for example SNAE 2013, 26).

The development of norm-critical perspectives and a norm-critical pedagogy in Sweden over the past decade derives from work in activist, practitioner and academic contexts, and is informed by queer feminist critique (Butler 1990, 2004) and anti-oppressive pedagogy (Kumashiro 2002). Norm-critical perspectives and pedagogy in particular are characterised by a distancing from the previously dominant ‘tolerance pedagogy’ in education, whereby the majority is educated towards the acceptance of minorities within equality work (Langmann 2013). Instead, the new focus is directed toward exposing the construction and history of normality, investigating how oppressions operate by the repeating of norms in everyday lives, and engaging educators and pupils to think critically and question structures of power as well as their own oppressive actions and positions (Brade 2008; Bromseth and Darj 2010; Björkman and Bromseth 2019; Martinsson and Reimers 2014).

As mentioned above, support for an inclusive and anti-discriminatory sex education is well established at a policy level, and a norm-critical perspective has been put forward by the National Agency for Education as a way to achieve these aims (see also Langmann and Månsson 2016). However, while a range of aspects of difference and power-related structuring such as gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, functionality and age are tied to an inclusive agenda and norm-critical pedagogy, scholars note that the centre of this work has evolved around gender and sexuality, and that inclusion and critique in relation to race, ethnicity and religion remain contested areas (Bredström and Bolander 2019; Bredström 2016; Sherlock 2015). At the same time, young people from a migrant background constitute a priority group for sex education in Sweden (Nationell strategi mot hiv/aids och andra smittsamma sjukdomar 2017), and there is a need and striving for sex education for all (see for example RFSU 2016). These circumstances pose questions about how a socially and culturally inclusive sex education should be interpreted and carried out, and how potential tensions between ‘mainstream education’ and norm-critical efforts are negotiated.

This article focuses on sex education practices that hold a clearly stated inclusive aim and norm-critical approach. It builds on fieldwork on sex education in upper secondary schools that have a large percentage of students with a migrant background, language introduction programmes for young people that have recently arrived in Sweden, and in-service teacher training in sex education for young migrants. The purpose of the article is to use data from participant observation and interviews to examine examples of how an inclusive and equality-informed agenda is made intelligible and put into action by teachers in classrooms. By investigating how the (counter) tactical politics (Youdell 2011) of an inclusive approach to sex education practices are enacted and materialised, we strive to problematise the ‘new’ sex education politics at a broader level as well as in the meaning-making of educators and materialisation of sex education in the classroom.

The current call for inclusion and equality in sex education

If we look at the calls for inclusive and equality-oriented sex education in a broader perspective, we see that the understanding of sex education as a primary public health matter has been increasingly challenged in recent years. Scholars have argued that a shift in emphasis from sexual health to sexual rights within the field of sex and
relationship education could be seen as a result of the calls to ‘focus more explicitly on
gender, sexuality, plurality and power’ (Sundaram and Sauntson 2016, 2). School-based
sex education is on the one hand stated as a safe and legitimising environment for
young people to gain knowledge of sex, sexuality and health (Ingham and Hirst 2010),
while a parallel critique is put forward that highlights issues in sex education pointing
towards a need to challenge sexism, racism, classism and heterosexism in and outside
classrooms (Fields 2008, 36).

Scholars argue for the need for an empowering critical pedagogy, where students are the
subjects rather than the objects subjected to adult regimes of sex education (Naezer,
Rommes, and Jansen 2017). Scholars such as Sanjakdar et al. (2015) emphasise that in
order to implement such ideals, attention to the hegemony of teaching practices in this
area, including aspects of authority and subordination, is central. In relation to sex educa-
tion, they see teachers’ and students’ mutual involvement in critique as ‘particularly impor-
tant for enabling an examination into notions of inequality, exploitation, oppression and
domination’ (Sanjakdar et al. 2015, 61). Here, we see an important problematisation of
centres and margins in sex education, where notions of ‘difference’ run the risk of becoming
simply ‘add-ons’ in terms of religious, cultural, and sexual plurality (Haggis and Mullholland
2014). This is also visible in the way that some notions of plurality and diversity are identified
in terms of ‘difficulties’ or ‘challenges’ rather than others (Allen and Quinlivan 2016). The
central interest of this article is this ongoing formulation and reformulation of sex education,
framed either in terms of health or in terms of rights. The continuous struggle to reinforce, as
well as challenge, particular meanings and power relations situates sex education as a highly
politicised field (Alldred and David 2007).

At a general level, Swedish sex education strives to balance between affirming
pleasure and reducing the risk of unwanted pregnancy, STIs, sexual exploitation and
other negative elements related to sexuality (Centerwall 1995; Bolander 2009). Although
the incorporation of pleasure in the overall sex educational content is widely debated in
feminist writings on sex education, not least in the influential work of Fine (1988) and
Fine and McClelland (2006), the politics of pleasure and desire have in recent years come
under scrutiny in a way that uncovers crucial ideas of secularity intertwined with ideas of
sexual pleasure, desire and progressivism. The analysis of ‘sexularism’ (Scott 2009, 2018)
illuminates and problematises how ‘Western’ secular coded values are seen as obviously
progressive and other, mainly confessional, approaches are marginalised in sex and
relationships education (Rasmussen 2016, 2012; Allen, Rasmussen, and Quinlivan
2014). In the case of sex education in Sweden, the concept of sexularism speaks to
how ideas of emancipation are intertwined with liberal ideals of individuality and free-
dom of choice. Nordic scholars have shown how equality and tolerance have been used as
ethnic markers, and how being ‘Swedish’ or ‘Norwegian’ becomes synonymous with
being equal and tolerant of sexual minorities (Reimers 2007; Røthing and Bang Svendsen
2010, 2011). Homophobia and patriarchal structures are thereby placed elsewhere –
among immigrants – reproducing notions about different cultures and religions. In this
context it is notable that issues such as violence, virginity claims and patriarchy are
connected to ‘honour-related’ oppression and culture of the Other (Gruber 2011),
creating troubled sexuality rooted ‘elsewhere’ and leaving the notion of ‘Swedish
sexuality’ as an unchallenged ideal. Although ideas of norm-critical pedagogy emerged
partly from this kind of critical research, it is important to study the educational practices
informed by these perspectives; not least in terms of how practice potentially challenges theory and vice versa.

**Method, settings, and theoretical departure**

This article is informed by the project Young People and Sexual Risk-taking – An Intersectional Analysis of Representations, Knowledge and Experiences, which was carried out from 2012 to 2016. The overall aim of the project was to critically examine the messages around young people, sexual risk and safer sex found in informational materials and formal educational contexts from an intersectional perspective, using different qualitative methods such as text analysis, participant observation and interviews.

In this article, we use empirical material derived from fieldwork in two regions in Sweden. Although a progressive and politically supported form of sexuality education is widely promoted in the Swedish context, there is also definite variation and lack of equivalence between different schools and regions (SNAE 2000; Swedish Schools Inspectorate 2018). So, rather than focusing on shortage or absence of education we went in search of practices that were labelled ‘good’ and in line with the broader emphasis of sex education in the national curriculum (SNAE 2011a, 2011b), in order to see how this education was carried out. We used information from national sex education newsletters, newspaper reports and other material to identify specific schools and key-persons and gain access to specific localities. This ‘good’ or ‘cutting edge’ label was also applied to an in-service teacher-training programme for teachers in Swedish as a second language (not least by describing it as ‘norm critical sex education’) which we followed on a regular basis over two terms. We also observed in-service teacher training events organised as single occasions, such as at conferences and in open lectures. These training programmes and lectures emphasised inclusive education and critical perspectives on norms and normality, as well as clarified the placement of sexuality and relationship education in the 2011 school curriculum.

The classroom practices that we observed consisted mainly of sex education in two upper secondary schools (students aged 16–19 years). We visited one of the schools regularly over a period of seven months in 2013–2014, and carried out recurrent observations in the other in the spring of 2014. These schools were both located in larger cities, and the vast majority of the students had migrated to Sweden or had parents with a migrant background. We met classes from different national educational programmes and from language introduction, which is a preparatory programme which included Swedish language and elementary school subjects aimed at recent immigrants aged 16–20 years.

During the fieldwork, we conducted observation both together and individually. For the most part we sat at the side of the classrooms taking notes; even if we were sometimes asked to comment on specific issues or topics, our level of participation was largely limited to helping rearrange materials and settings before and between lessons. We participated in planning and evaluation meetings and had regular conversations with teachers. We conducted recorded semi-structured interviews with eight teachers and other educators, individually or in small groups. The combination of
observations and interviews enabled us to ask specific questions based on classroom situations and to follow up on topics and aspects that came forward in different settings.

The fieldwork was in some ways multi-sited (Coleman and von Hellerman 2011). Even though our intent was not to make a comparative analysis of sex education practices, the value of the multi-sited approach was the observation of travelling discourses and materialisation of core issues (i.e. norm-critique, inclusion, and anti-discrimination) in and across different settings.

The analysis was theoretically informed by critical perspectives on power, education and democracy (Foucault [1976] 1990, Biesta 2006; Youdell 2011) as well as by intersectional perspectives illuminating the co-production of power-related structuring of difference and identity positions (Crenshaw 1991; De Los Reyes and Mulinari 2005). These starting points underlined our view of educational practices as something that could produce and sustain, as well as potentially challenge and transform, social inequality and injustice.

The limits of radical, critical pedagogies have been discussed by Gore (1998) who highlights the sometimes blurred lines between these pedagogies and ‘mainstream pedagogy’, when enacted in practice. As a result, the micro-analysis of classroom situations is crucial for gaining knowledge of how these tensions are manifested, knowledge which can help further develop the field of critical pedagogy (Gore 1998). Through classroom observation we can gain an understanding of the complexities and constraints of inclusive pedagogical practices. The analysis paid particular attention to the potentially conflicting materialisation of the critically-oriented agenda of an inclusive and anti-discriminatory sex education and the ‘business as usual of education’ (Youdell 2011, 130), as a producer of inequalities and exclusion. What is said, how it is said, who says it, and what is not said are foundational questions for understanding how sexuality (Foucault 1993; Cameron and Kulick 2003) and sex education are done. By investigating how the micro-politics of sex education practices are enacted and materialised, we strove to problematise how norms are not only challenged but also reinforced in encounters in the classroom.

**Analysis and results**

An important point of departure among the educators was to avoid making assumptions about students. Rather, it was repeatedly stressed in discussion and interviews that the student body included sexually active and non-sexually active persons, different sexualities, trans* and cis persons, religious (a variety of faiths and religions) and non-religious persons, and both victims and perpetrators of sexual abuse and ‘honour-related’ violence. Considering the students’ educationally, culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds and the lack of consistency in sex education in Swedish elementary schools, a major part of the sex education in one of the upper secondary schools and in language introduction programmes was set aside to ensure that all students gained what was referred to as ‘basic sexual health knowledge’. This basic knowledge included functions of the reproductive organs, the menstruation cycle and STIs, areas that commonly, and according to the national curricula, belong to the elementary rather than secondary stages of education in Sweden. The education provided also included a focus on themes such as love and relationships, the Internet and grooming, honour and violence. In many respects this sex education seemed to fit a rather traditional frame, but approaches on norms, normality
and power stood out as specific and interlinked ways of addressing the quite typical content.

In the following sections, we will look more closely at three strategies or tactics that we discerned in the aim for inclusion and equality in sex education: namely, the careful choice of words, the incorporation of sensitive subjects into other subjects, and the use of different modalities. These strategies worked in a largely intertwined way, as they often appeared simultaneously when discussing specific topics. They also appeared more or less intentional, sometimes outspoken, for instance in interviews, and sometimes not as deliberate. Overall, a particular use of language clearly emerged as a crucial factor in the embodiment of a norm-critical sex education practice.

**Careful choice of words**

The preoccupation with language in the sex education practices that we observed came to matter in several ways. Overall, there was an evident understanding of language as a key to social and societal inclusion. Besides a basic understanding of language as a means of communication, not least in language introduction classes, for instance by using ‘easy’ words, repetition and making sure everybody understood what was said, it was clear that a norm-critical approach and a striving for an inclusive practice manifested itself through particular types of language use.

In particular, some significant words were used consistently throughout this education, not linked to any specific subject matter, but rather as a general way of addressing oneself and the students. In lectures and discussions, teachers used the Swedish gender-neutral pronoun *hen* when appropriate, as a complement to *han* (he) and *hon* (she). This broadening of language use can be seen as an attempt to resist the binary gender system. The word *hen* made its way from the queer feminist movement into the public arena around 2012, and its use is not uncontroversial (Gustafsson Sendén, Bäck, and Lindqvist 2015). By using this ‘political pronoun’ (Gustavson 2014), teachers strived to open up the possibility of gender ambiguity and a subject position other than ‘boy’ and ‘girl,’ as well as to avoid unnecessary gendering. This approach was not explained to the students as one goal was, as expressed in interviews with teachers, to make these wordings self-evident. Another specific example of language use as resistance, here against heteronormativity, was a consistent use of the term *partner* (the same word and meaning as in English but not so commonly used in Swedish), ‘the one you live with’, or similar wordings (cf. Sauntson 2018, 172). For example, in class when using themself as an example, a teacher might say ‘If I choose to live with a man’ and then say ‘If I fell in love with a woman’, leaving the question of the teacher’s sexual identity open, or possibly fixed as bisexual. This type of phrasing differed from the generally more traditional or normative language used by the students, expressed in student-teacher dialogues such as this:

*Student:* Is it the man who cuts the umbilical cord?

*Teacher:* The partner. Girlfriend, boyfriend, et cetera.

Teachers were not only careful to use gender neutral language; they sometimes, as in this example, sought to adjust the language used by students. Students were generally addressed in the same manner, with formulations such as ‘If you had a boyfriend or
girlfriend’, which although they construct only two subject positions avoid any direct assumptions of boys having girlfriends and vice versa. As one teacher concluded: ‘the students are used to being addressed as potentially non-heterosexual’. Inconsistent use of this approach contributed to making it discernible as a specific strategy. On one occasion when students from one of the schools, as part of the sex education, visited a nearby youth clinic it became clear that not all the educators had adopted the approach in its entirety. While both the entrance hall and the room where we were seated to meet a midwife and a nurse had rainbow flags as signalling a LGBTQ-friendly environment, the students were consistently addressed as heterosexuals.

Another example of the micro politics of choosing particular words concerned the urgency of finding suitable words for female genitalia, a question which has been stressed in several contexts over the years (Milles 2011). The problem that was firmly addressed was primarily the risk of mystifying or reproducing an inability to speak about female genitals at all. In classes, we noted a variety of terms such as ‘vagina’, mutta (the latter translates into cunt or pussy) and snippa, a term launched by feminist sex educators in the early 2000s, now widely spread and accepted as a neutral and colloquial name for the female genitals, as a counterpart to the male snopp (‘willy’) (Milles 2011, see also Sherlock 2015). In the education classes these terms were used synonymously, though it was suggested that some were more appropriate when visiting a pharmacy and others when speaking among friends and partners. The main concern was not about using the right word but about using proper words instead of euphemisms such as dår nere ‘down there’ or framstjärt ‘front bottom’ (which were jokingly dismissed).

Specific exercises and methods of achieving a language of inclusion were shared in the in-service teacher training; for example, practising how to answer potential student questions in broadening, inclusive and less normative ways. Here, as well as in situations observed in other settings, we witnessed a resistance to distinguishing between ‘us’ and ‘them’, as for example ‘Swedes’ and ‘non-Swedes’, and in-depth thought-out strategies on how to avoid unnecessary gendering and heterosexual assumptions. These careful choices of words were clearly connected to the idea that words do things (Butler 1997) and that the careful use of language offers a way to enable social change (Fairclough 1992). However, when put into practice this strategy also pointed towards a potentially static dimension of the approach, placing the critical potential in the pre-formulated actions of individual teachers rather than in a shared deconstructive practice.

**Incorporation of ‘sensitive’ topics into less sensitive ones**

In line with a broadening and inclusive focus on LGBTQ issues and a resistance against treating such issues as a specific theme, the sex education practices revealed a pervasive ambition to address students of various sexual orientations under the overall umbrella of the ‘body and sexuality’. There was a recurrent resistance of the ways in which non-heterosexuality and in particular homosexuality have been silenced (Epstein, O’Flynn, and Telford 2003), problematised, made into a topic for discussion, and measured against the taken-for-granted heterosexuality in sex education (Røthing 2008, Bolander 2009). Instead of applying a tolerance approach, in which supposedly heterosexual students are expected to express a degree of ‘homotolerance’ (Røthing 2008), an overt goal of a norm-critical approach was to present various sexual orientations without hierarchisation. One way to
achieve this was via the incorporation of ‘LGBTQ questions’ in other topics, rather than treating them a topic on their own. In one interview, this approach was described as being in contrast to having special LGBTQ theme days and ‘gimmicks’:

Teacher: We are trying to take it as something self-evident, just skip that step [theme days] and think one step ahead. It should be a non-issue, that’s the goal.

In classes, sexual orientation labels such as hetero-, homo-, and bisexuality were given minor space. Instead of discussing sexual identities, teachers primarily focused on ‘body parts’, sexual feelings and sexual practices. These working methods could clearly be seen as connected to and in line with ‘new’ approaches of including identities and practices in ‘norm-critical’ informed teaching materials in the field (Bolander 2015, 296). Again, the careful use of language was the main tool for inclusion. How to speak about vaginal intercourse without making it equivalent to ‘sex’ was a prominent issue here. Feminist- and queer-informed research has pointed out that ‘sex’ being generally understood as synonymous with vaginal intercourse poses a problem for an inclusive sex education (Bolander 2015; Svendsen 2012). In classes, this problem was partly circumvented by being more specific in saying ‘vaginal sex’ thus reserving the word ‘sex’ for all types of activities regardless of sexual identity, and by emphasising that there are several other ways of having sex besides intercourse. This latter message was also integrated into lessons on STIs prevention, where transmission routes other than heterosexual vaginal intercourse were discussed and several ways of prevention (dental dam, the condom and the femidom) were mentioned. Teachers often corrected themselves and each other if ‘sex’ was used synonymously with vaginal intercourse, and if vaginal intercourse was given too much attention, as in the following:

Teacher 1: You can have sex in many different ways. Girl-girl, boy-boy, and so on, but if we say that a girl is going to have sex with a guy and he’s inserting his penis …

Teacher 2: (interrupts) Or fingers …

Another typical form of words can be understood as slippages, such as a teacher saying ‘If you’re having sex, I mean vaginal sex …’ Teachers continuously reflected on these kinds of lapses and discussed ways of improving their teaching in post-lesson sessions and in the interviews. Slippages such as these show how resistance towards norms simultaneously made these norms extra visible, exposing yet repeating them. As well as reflecting on perceived errors or lapses in the education, teachers expressed concern over students’ understandings and perceptions of their efforts to ‘normalise’. In interviews, some teachers stated a wish to really affect their students, beyond lip service:

Teacher A: Is it possible to normalise something previously ‘abnormal’ by not addressing it as a topic? Perhaps we just think we have changed the norms by making the students say hen and so on, but really they just think ‘shoot those bastards’.

Teacher B: I think we really do both. We know there’s massive homophobia here, and it slips out sometimes. You can hear it in the hallways sometimes. But they know what we think. I think that in a sense we’re role models, and they have to process this in their own lives. But perhaps we have to be better at not avoiding the question.

Teacher A: Yes. In the long run if everyone did things like us … [it would make a difference]
Strategies such as these were generally applied after careful and continuous consideration. The fact that anti-gay hate speech was present in the school led the teachers to consider whether or not a ‘norm-broadening’ approach was enough or if tolerance-based approaches, for instance the inclusion of LGBTQ theme days, could be a complement. However, the risk of then reproducing non-heterosexuality as deviance was viewed as too great. Overall, teachers thought their current approach was the best possible way of addressing sexual identities and practices, albeit a far from perfect one.

There was constant reflection on how to organise and incorporate certain messages in education. In planning, discussing and organising the sex education content, an affirmative approach in line with the core ideals of progressive Swedish sex education was often used. The concept of *lusanatomi* (literally lust anatomy) was commonly used as a way of highlighting sexual feelings and the sensitivity of genitalia and the body, rather than focusing on the instrumental functions of reproductive organs. One educator explained:

> These concepts of ‘lust anatomy’ and ‘reproductive anatomy’: it’s quite a clever way to facilitate the planning of teaching … a focus on anatomy in terms of lust and pleasure – and then other things can evolve around that.

With a starting point in the ‘positive’ aspects of the body, less desirable aspects such as the risk of infection and unwanted pregnancies could be highlighted while not constituting the governing framework of particular themes in education. One topic that was particularly carefully considered by teachers and other educators was the controversial subject of female genital mutilation (Campbell, MacKinnon, and Stevens 2010, 244), which brought forth different cultural-, legal-, medical-, and abuse-oriented understandings. In classes, female genital mutilation was addressed when discussing the female genitals. Teachers in some cases knew or assumed that some of their students had been subjected to such procedures, which led them to tread carefully when addressing the subject. In discussion, the teachers reflected on which term to use – ‘mutilation’ or ‘circumcision’ – but in class they usually refrained from using the term ‘mutilation’. By using less ‘scary’ words and, as one teacher put it, ‘meeting the students in their reality’, teachers first and foremost aimed at reaching out to students and encouraging them to seek medical help for any problems that may have been caused by mutilation. Despite being incorporated into education about female genitals, female genital mutilation as a particularly sensitive topic was expressed via a softer tone of voice and a clear absence of humorous framing. The overall strategy used seemed to have been devised with these particular students subjected to genital cutting in mind, rather than for the majority to learn about practices of ‘the other’ or invoke indignation over these practices.

The way in which the topic was connected to lust and pleasure was also significant, as the possibility of enjoying sex despite mutilation was emphasised. In this way, everyone could be included in the paradigm of pleasure which is so central to Swedish sex education. In class this manifested itself explicitly through writing on the white board stating: *Sex skall alltid vara skönt* (Sex shall always feel good), a ‘pleasure imperative’ indeed (Wood et al. 2019; Allen 2012). Within the logic described, one could say that ‘education for the other’ (Kumashiro 2002, 32) was utilised to reduce the gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’, while simultaneously strengthening pleasure and lust as ideal and central matters to one’s well-being. This organisation of content, with the incorporation of sensitive topics into less-
sensitive ones, should therefore be understood as an ideal of focusing on similarities and ‘positive’ aspects, and reducing differences between students.

**The use of different modalities**

The choice of which words to use and which to avoid was one way in which language was operationalised in the aim for an inclusive education. Another recurring aspect of the sex education practices was the use of different modalities; that is, how things were said (Fairclough 1992, 58–59). Teachers in class often adopted a modality of openness or optionality in relation to the propositions at stake, which enabled different possibilities and in that sense avoided or questioned normative assumptions. One of the topics where this modality operated was parenthood. Students were often positioned as ‘parents to be’, for instance when teachers appealed to their supposed wishes of becoming parents as a reason to avoid Chlamydia infection (which can cause sterility). Ways of referring to students’ possible reproductive future also seemed to work as a way to involve non-sexually active students in sex education. The topics of pregnancy, giving birth, child care and coming parenthood were brought up strikingly often, but generally in a way that presented them as optional via formulations such as ‘if you want to be a parent’ and ‘if one chooses to breastfeed’. In the same manner, when describing how to put on a condom the teachers were careful to say, ‘if there is a foreskin . . .’, thus not taking either male circumcision or non-circumcision for granted. This kind of open formulation was viewed as key to avoiding discrimination and addressing all the students at once.

In contrast to topics presented in the modality of openness and optionality, there were other topics where the teachers did not leave the same room for hesitation or options. For example, when addressing issues regarding female genitalia and pleasure, the modality changed into a categorical or ‘objective’ one (Fairclough 1992, 159), with an evident urge to ‘speak the truth’ and rely on ‘neutral’ facts. In one of the schools, when anatomy was addressed, students were divided into single-gender groups and given the task of filling out sheets with all parts of the genitalia. This knowledge was stressed as key from two different perspectives: health and pleasure. The group of girls concluded that ‘knowing yourself and what you like’ was the foundation of being able to enjoy sex with a partner. Some genital parts were discussed in extra detail. The clitoris was highlighted as extremely sensitive, and as ‘an organ entirely for pleasure’. The teachers also referred to the historical and still-prevailing different standards for men and women, where men’s sexuality and pleasure has been taken for granted whilst women’s sexuality has been hidden and passive. Sometimes the sex education provided was made explicitly part of the ongoing struggle for gender equality:

*Teacher:* Boys get erections, girls get lubrication. In the name of gender equality, it is important that we learn this.

In this context it was important to stress the term ‘lubrication’ itself, as well as what it is and where it comes from, as something previous generations had not learned about. In the same way, greater emphasis was placed on the clitoris, including its crus. The sex-positive feminist approach underpinning this education was evident in the ways female pleasure was highlighted. An intertwined part of this matter was the question of sexual
freedom for women. In this context, the categorical modality was set to work again as an instrument for equality, informed by the general silence surrounding the female genitals and suppression of women’s sexual pleasure. Here teachers left no room for ambivalence or tried to engage students in thinking about different possibilities. Instead, they pointed out right and wrong. It was clear therefore that the supposedly neutral information presented about genital anatomy was far from apolitical, and exposed central tensions. This was especially apparent in the emphasis given to another part of the female genitals, namely the *slidkrans* (vaginal corona). This term was coined by the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) in 2009 to replace the existing Swedish term for the hymen (*mödomshinna*), which translated literally as ‘virginity membrane’ and is now deemed medically incorrect and patriarchal (Christianson and Eriksson 2013; RFSU 2009). The use of the term *slidkrans* opens up the possibility of a shift from the heteronormative concept of virginity as first penile-vaginal penetration. It also dispels the idea, in this discourse often called ‘a myth’, of a membrane that tears and bleeds and can be used to verify whether if one is a virgin or not.

In class, the teachers drew vaginal coronas of different shapes and sizes on the whiteboard, visualising variety and emphasising that it is impossible to determine whether a person has had intercourse and that coronal stretching does not always result in bleeding. When students occasionally objected and pointed towards different understandings, these were passed off as the misconceptions of the less knowledgeable or of ‘ancient times’:

*Student:* My mother thinks it does exist.

*Teacher 1:* I thought so too when I was a child.

*Teacher 2:* It was believed to be true in the past in Sweden too … white sheets on the wedding night. Was there any blood? Or had she been with someone else?

The teachers viewed conveying this knowledge to the students as one of the most important tasks of sex education. When on one occasion a teacher forgot to talk about the vaginal corona as planned, this was considered a cardinal mistake. We were told that information on the vaginal corona was important knowledge for everybody, but especially for students who in some way were members of so-called honour cultures in which women in particular are controlled, and virginity until marriage is an absolute demand. In this context, the teachers adopted a strong will to deconstruct and correct mainstream vocabulary, aiming to liberate the students involved and make them see that there is no scientific basis for the concept of ‘virginity checks’ or related practices. Again, the teachers were certainly willing to take a stand, but here reflections on the range of symbolic meanings and the overall complexity of virginity and purity understandings were set aside in order to be ‘perfectly clear’ on the subject.

**Discussion**

The sex education witnessed in this study can in many ways, internationally as well as in the general Swedish context, be considered ‘good practice’ (cf. Sherlock 2015). It was a form of sex education that worked in line with, or ahead of, the strengthened focus on
inclusion and anti-discrimination in Swedish national sex education curricula and policy. The problematisation that our findings offers should be read in relation to these conditions, and with the goal of contributing to the ongoing development in the field (see also Bredström, Bolander, and Bengtsson 2019).

Overall, we see that the preoccupation with a careful use of language in sex education is intertwined with notions of language as a tool for social change towards a more equal distribution of power. What is said and how things are said are both essential to distinguishing norm-critical sex education as a specific pedagogy with theoretical roots in queer theory and post-structuralism. We believe that the adoption of deconstructionist perspectives, including a critical approach to norms and power in formal sex education, offers many possibilities and can be elaborated upon in various ways so as to deepen and expand sex education. The analysis in this article reveals the use of several different strategies in pursuit of such goals. The first of these involved being cautious about one’s choice of words and achieving a language of inclusion. It particularly signals the wish to avoid reproducing binary gendered notions or polarisation of ‘us’ and ‘them’ in terms of sexual identity. The second strategy that we identified was a resistance to treating certain subjects as deviant, and involved integrating sensitive or politically charged questions into the overall sex educational content. The third and last strategy discussed was the use of different modalities. This entailed using language pointing towards different options and which opens up possibilities of different wishes and futures. Nevertheless, it sometimes also involved making truth-claims in an effort to challenge and expose norms as myths and traditions, such as in the case of the vaginal corona or the suppression of women’s sexual pleasure.

The strategies of putting deconstructionist perspectives to work were not without difficulties. While norm-critical perspectives highlight and embrace ambivalence and conflicts as a way of enhancing democratic, anti-discriminatory and inclusive ideals (Bromseth and Darj 2010), the analysis also shows tensions and discomforts in the approach when acted out in practice. In relation to the choice of ‘inclusive’ wording, it became obvious that terminology was prepared in depth in relation to sex and gender, while it was not as obvious how educators would find the right words in relation to, for example racialisation, and functionality. This strategy made sexuality and gender a kind of comfort zone, creating centres and margins through the inclusive treatment efforts. A preoccupation with the choice of words also placed the critical efforts in close proximity to the individual’s individual actions (i.e. their ability to use the ‘right’ words). Here we can distinguish at least two problems in need of consideration: the risk of obscuring the complexities of unequal structuring, and the hierarchisation of language skills – not least visible in contexts where many students are not native speakers.

Another central tension exemplified in the analyses arose in the shift between different modalities. Topics that were specifically culturalised, such as female genital mutilation and the vaginal corona, were addressed with specific modalities; a softer voice, and the speaking of ‘truth’. This speaking of truth in the name of gender equality reveals how some subjects, norms and values were opened up for ambivalence and interrogation while others were to be conveyed in a directed manner. This asymmetry may be seen as part of a goal-oriented, value-based educational policy per se, but it is clear that the use of an objective modality made the position of the teacher’s expertise as well as the critical potential of the sex education classroom appear rather fixed. The critical potential of the norm-critical approach
was in some ways subordinated to a particular educational order and hence took the form of providing students with results of feminist and queer critique, rather than engaging them in dialogue and a joint process of confronting and critically examining power asymmetries.

As we have shown, norm-critical pedagogy offers the opportunity to ‘mess’ with some of the normative assumptions present in sex education (cf. Martinsson and Reimers 2014). At the same time, however, (norm-) critical pedagogy is entangled with ‘the effects of power produced within [the] pedagogy itself.’ (Gore 1998, 285). The tension between, on the one hand, a sex education that takes a stand for certain values and, on the other, tactics that strive to open up and involve students in a critical pedagogy, is not easily resolved and perhaps should not be resolved. However, we believe it is crucial to acknowledge these tensions and invite students to explore what we need to think and ‘do differently’ (Youdell 2011, 12, but see also Naezer, Rommes, and Jansen 2017; Sanjakdar et al. 2015) in order to challenge social and sexual injustice, both within and outside school.

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