

(S-)existential Questions among Students – Sexuality and Relations Education as part of Controversial Issues with importance for Citizenship Education¹

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Abstract:

This paper emanates from a research mission from the Public Health Agency of Sweden and the study was a mapping of Sexuality and Relations education and Reproductive health and Rights (SRHR) in the various Teacher Education programs throughout Sweden during the year 2016. Together with two colleagues, a survey of 875 syllabi from all universities in Sweden was analyzed through a qualitative textual discourse analysis. The theory behind the study is based on the fact that syllabi at Swedish Universities are designed based on the theory of constructive alignment. The overall result shows major differences between various universities. In the quantitative part, graphs show a great variation of the presence of indicators related to the subject area, such as i.e., ethics, gender, democracy, norms, norm criticism, core values, convention on the rights of the child, human rights, discrimination and offensive treatment.

During 2018, questionnaires was administered to 175 student teachers from various Teacher Education Programs exploring the educational insights they have gained during their education regarding Sexuality and Relations and SRHR. This chapter presents results from both these studies and places them in a larger context of the debate of the subject area of Sexuality and Relations and SRHR in Education at various levels in Sweden today and involves agents such as the Swedish ministry of Education. (S-)Existential questions are urgent questions and are currently debated as controversial issues among young students in Sweden today, and thus considered to be an urgent part of an active citizenship education.

Keywords

Sexuality and Relations, Religious Education, Existential questions, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, Upper secondary school, Teacher education

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Introduction

Religious Education (RE) has been a compulsory subject in Sweden since the beginning of compulsory school regulations in 1842. Early on, it involved only teachings in Christianity and Biblical studies, but the subject Religious Education has changed over the years and from 1969 the curricula and syllabi have been labelled *Religionskunskap* (*Knowledge of Religions*) and considered a non-confessional subject. Thus, there is now an emphasis on various religions in the world (not only Christianity) as well as on ethics and existential questions, or life questions. These three parts are still important parts of the syllabi in the RE subject in both compulsory school and in upper secondary school, even if the syllabi are continuously revised (the latest revision is to be introduced in 2021).

The aim of this chapter is twofold. First, the aim is to focus on the position of existential questions in general and about (S-)existential questions in particular, in RE in Swedish schools today. The second focus of this chapter centers on the importance of Sexuality and Relations Education for teachers, based primarily on a report on the prevalence of Sexuality and Relations Education in various teacher education courses, but also on a questionnaire administered to student teachers about what they consider important in the subject area of Sexuality and Relations today. Results from the first report have been presented in a paper at the CiCea Conferences in Warszawa in 2018 and in Prague 2010, and some of these results have also been published elsewhere during 2018 and 2019 (Liljefors Persson 2018, 2019 and 2019). However, the results from the questionnaire among teacher students have not been published yet.

The main research questions in this article are the following: What position do existential questions and particularly questions regarding sexuality and relations have and how are they formulated in RE on various levels? How are student teachers prepared for teaching the subject area Sexuality and Relations Education in their teacher education programs?

(S-)existential questions within Religious Education in Sweden

In Sweden, instructions to inform teachers to teach Sexuality and Relations Education have been developed since 1935 and the subject area became compulsory in 1955 (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2005). From 1962 onwards, questions about sexuality and relations have been found in the Biology and RE syllabi, and from 2011 the subject area, Sex and Human Relationships as it has been labelled by the Swedish Ministry of Education, has been seen as a cross-disciplinary subject area. In the National Curricula and syllabi from 2011 for both compulsory school and upper secondary school, there are central content goals formulated that relate to this subject area in most school subjects. This subject area should be included in every subject even if it does not have a special goal related directly to that specific subject area, as it is stated in the National Curricula

(Skolverket, May 2013, p. 23 and November 2013, p. 27). It is also stated that it is one of the Head's main responsibilities to organize Sexuality and Relations Education (Lgr 11/Compulsory school 2011, p. 20 and Gy11/Upper Secondary School 2011, p 14.).

There is thus a long historical tradition surrounding the teachings of Sexuality and Relations Education in Sweden (Myndigheten för Skolutveckling, 2005). There is a certain ambiguity in how to label this subject area, but the term Sexuality and Relations will be used in this chapter in line with the RFSU, Swedish Association for Sexuality Education, which have also decided to use the term Sexualitet och relationer (Sexuality and Relations) for this subject area that has been labelled Sex- och samlevnadsundervisning (Sex and Human Relationships) in the school system. The Folkhälsomyndigheten (Agency for Public Health) use the label SRHR, Sexualitet och reproduktiv hälsa och rättigheter (Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights). Therefore, there is still no general agreement on how to define this subject area on a national level in Sweden.

With reference to both pupils' and student teachers' thoughts about the kind of existential questions they consider important, Sexuality and Relations Education is pointed out as maybe the most important content that relates to existential questions as well as within the subject RE as a whole (Jönsson & Liljefors Persson, National Evaluation 2003). This is not a surprise as questions of gender, sexuality and relations are so essential in identity formation, especially among young people. In the latest National Curriculum from 2011, the subject area Sexuality and Relations Education is one cross curricular theme that ought to be an integrated part in all subjects of compulsory and upper secondary schools (Skolverket May 2013 and Skolverket November 2013).

Goals that are based on the fundamental values are formulated in the first main paragraph in the National guidelines for all schools and some of those values are also found in the syllabus for Religious Education in Swedish Compulsory School. Under the headline "Purpose of the RE subject" we find the following formulations that connect to the position of the (S-)Existential questions within RE:

- Teaching should encourage pupils to reflect on various issues concerning life, their identity and their ethical attitudes. This way, teaching should create the conditions for pupils to develop a personal attitude to life and an understanding of how they and others are thinking and living.
- Teaching should help pupils to develop their knowledge of how different religions and other outlooks on life view questions concerning gender, gender equality, sexuality and relationships. In addition, pupils should be prepared to analyze and determine their standpoint to ethical and moral questions.
- Teaching should also contribute to pupils developing an understanding of how people's values are linked to religions and other outlooks on life. It should

also contribute to pupils developing their capacity to act responsibly in relation to them and their surroundings.

- Teaching religion should essentially give pupils the opportunities to develop their ability to:
- analyze Christianity, other religions and other outlooks on life, as well as different interpretations and use of these,
- reflect over life issues and their own and other's identity
- reason and discuss moral issues and values based on ethical concepts and models, and
- search for information about religions and other outlooks on life and evaluate the relevance and credibility of sources.
- (Skolverket, 2011/Compulsory School 2011, RE syllabus, p 176.)

Existential questions have been part of the Swedish curriculum and syllabi since 1980, but it seems they have never really broken through into classrooms. Above we have seen that pupils and students want to study more about existential questions, and this goes well in hand with the fact that goals are formulated in the curriculum and syllabi around existential questions. And if we look further into the *Central Content*, we will find that there are sections about existential questions for all levels throughout the Swedish compulsory school and upper secondary school according to the Syllabi from 2011 (Skolverket 2011, pp. 176-178 from Compulsory School and pp. 1-8 for Upper Secondary School. See English versions on curriculum and syllabi on www.skolverket.se).

In 2011, the new national curriculum and new syllabi for all the school subjects were introduced for both compulsory schools and upper secondary schools in Sweden. In connection to this, there were preparatory discussions with various groups of teacher educators and scholars organized and led by officials from the National Agency for Education during which there was some hesitancy expressed by some about whether existential questions should continue to be part of the RE subject. But existential questions are still formulated in certain goals as part of the central content for the RE subject from grade one and throughout upper secondary school (cf. Skolverket 2011, Lgr 11 & Gy11; Hartsmar & Liljefors Persson 2013, pp. 135-136.) As we see in the quotes above from the RE syllabus, existential questions still hold a prominent place in the formulations of the aims for Swedish RE education and they are still considered part of the central content even in the latest revisions that was decided by the Swedish government in 2020 and will be introduced in 2021. A relevant question to ask now is if teachers will follow the new syllabi more than before, and thus let existential questions be part of the content that they choose to teach in the classrooms.

Sexuality and Relations Education in Teacher Education programs

When I ask our new student teachers every autumn about their sexuality and relations education during their school years, they have a great variety of answers. While some of them have not had much Sexuality and Relations Education, some of them have had some education, but there are very few students who actually express that they have experienced a great deal of teaching about sexuality and relations. A very small number of students express that they consider their number of lessons as being enough. In a minor project from 2014–2017, written documentation from around 200 students was collected and they all thought that they have not had sufficient Sexuality and Relations Education during their years in school (Liljefors Persson, 2017).

Many students also have strong critical opinions about how the teaching was conducted. Some have felt that they had great problems while some stated that they were even bullied because they “came out” as homosexuals and faced controversies for various reasons in relation to Sexuality and Relations Education (Liljefors Persson, 2017).

Some of the students said that they have not had any teaching at all during their years in compulsory school. They also stated that the content varies a lot between the schools, and many said that they were usually divided into special groups for girls and for boys, that often have been led by the school nurses or people from the Youth health organizations and other external associations.

Many students also mentioned that they remember their teacher being embarrassed and insecure regarding the content they chose to teach. Some also said that their sexuality and relations education only focused on prevention and contraception. But some students also stated that they had excellent teaching sessions and many also remembered that the school organized thematic weeks where they approached the issues from a variety of perspectives either as a whole group most of the time or in separate groups (i.e., boys and girls). Students who had positive experiences from their school education, had worked with their regular teachers as well as experts from various institutions. Those students most often stated that they had very negative experiences from the lessons and were disappointed. (Liljefors Persson 2017).

The students request that they wanted to have an education that contained norm critical perspectives, questions of LGBTQ, honor-related violence and questions about gender. These issues go in hand with the existential questions from their religious education as well as a broader sense of citizenship education. Addressing existential questions in the classroom has the potential to empower young people as citizens, especially if they also connect to democratic values and questions of human rights, and it also has the potential to help pupils develop and grow through their own identity formation process (Eriksson 1999; Williams, Hinge & Liljefors Persson 2008, Liljefors Persson, 2009).

In their writings, all the students asked about how they should teach Sexuality

and Relation Education to their future pupils/students because of the poorly preparations that they had during their teacher training. Sexuality education is part of RE education and history education at my university, while in a couple of other courses (e.g., Educational Science), they grapple with content that relates to Sexuality and Relations Education but most often in a very broad sense (for instance, in discussions regarding democracy, human rights and norm critical perspectives). These issues are also much needed in education for newly arrived migrants (Liljefors Persson, 2020, Losic 2020). However, the position of Sexuality and Relations Education varies a lot among teacher education programs in Sweden according to the report I did together with two colleagues. (Andersson, I, Liljefors Persson, B and Olsson Hans, 2017, and 2020 in press).

Very few studies have explored the state of the art of Sexuality and Relations Education in teacher education in Sweden (RFSU 2004, UngKAB 2009 and Folkhälsomyndigheten 2017). A mapping of teacher education programs was conducted in 2004 by the Association of Sexuality Education (RFSU), and the result of that mapping was that there is a great variety both within and in-between various teacher education programs across Sweden. Five years later, in 2009, another mapping was carried out and the major result was that only 6 % of the student teachers had any contact with any teaching opportunities related to Sexuality and Relations Education whatsoever during their education programs (UngKAB09). In this study, only 20% of the students stated that they considered the content of teaching good or very good. This data also correlates well with two pilot projects carried out among teacher students (Liljefors Persson 2014-2017 and Liljefors Persson and Löfgren Mårtensson, 2018). It is significant that the subject area regarding equality, sexuality, gender and relations have not been mandatory in all teacher education programs, which is remarkable considering that the subject area has been compulsory in compulsory school in Sweden since 1955 (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2005 och Folkhälsomyndigheten 2017). However, it has now (September 2020) been decided that Sexuality and Relations Education should be a compulsory part of the main goals of all teacher education programs in Sweden, and it should be introduced in all programs by September 2021 (decision by The Higher Council of University Education, UKÄ, September 1, 2020).

Considering the importance of Sexuality and Relations Education and its emphasis in the latest school curriculum from 2011, there was surprisingly little knowledge about teaching this subject in various teacher education programs today. Therefore, this became the main aim of the project assigned by the Agency of Peoples Health, conducted by the author and two colleagues during 2016. The goal was to explore and map out the extent to which this area was present in teacher education programs, and also to explore the central content in the teaching lessons that were actually taught in teacher education programmes, with a special focus on HIV and STI prevention (Andersson, I, Liljefors Persson, B and Olsson, H 2017).

The project conducted a close reading of 875 course syllabi, which is about 80% of all course syllabi, from 24 universities throughout Sweden during 2016. A systematic analysis of the syllabi was carried out and 35 key words, or indicators, were searched for and registered according to the theoretical perspective of constructive alignment in the syllabi. This means in practice that every indicator was counted every time it showed up in the syllabi (Andersson et al., 2017 & 2020).

The key words/indicators that were mostly found in the course syllabus during various teacher education programs are: sexuality, equality, relations, democracy, human rights issues, gender issues, LGBTQ, STI, HIV prevention, reproduction and norm-critical perspectives on questions related to Sexuality and Relations Education. These are important themes that ought to be integrated in the subject area as a whole (Schlytter, 2009; Skolverket, 2010, Skolverket, maj 2013, Skolverket November 2013, Darj & Nathorst-Böös, 2011, Darj & Bromseth 2010). However, the indicators HIV and STI prevention, sexual health and pregnancy, which would suggest this kind of content in courses such as science for student teachers, are almost totally lacking. This may not necessary mean that in these courses in science they do not even address these themes, but since they are not written in the syllabi, they are probably not considered so important. The most important overall result regarding the course syllabi is that they should be much better written, and important content should be formulated and visible in all sections of the syllabi (e.g., the aim of the courses, the learning outcomes, the main content, the examinations, and in the course literature), according to the theory of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang 2011).

One of the most important results from this study in 2016, was that there were no specific studies in this area for 4-6 grade teachers in Sweden. This is interesting since Sexuality and Relations Education was formulated as a goal from the Higher Council of University Education/UKÄ, and should have been part of the curriculum for teacher education for grades 4-6 even before 2020, but not in the other teacher programs. However, as a result of the public debates regarding the Metoo-movement along with a study conducted in compulsory schools by the Ministry of School Inspection (Skolinspektionen 2018) and the report from the Institute of Public Health in 2017 (Andersson et al., 2017, 2020), this have now changed. Furthermore, as of September 1, 2020, there is now such a goal in all teacher education programs (from pre-school and compulsory school programs to upper secondary programs).

Moreover, if we consider that this subject has been part of the Swedish Compulsory School Curriculum in Sweden since the 1950's, it seems that there is now a fair possibility that future teachers will deal with Sexuality and Relations themes during their teacher education preparation (Myndigheten för skolutveckling 2005; Bolander 2009; Lgr11 & Gy11). The diagram below lists the key words found in the syllabi from courses in teacher education from all universities in Sweden. These key words illustrate the content that connects to sexuality and relations education for student teachers at present.

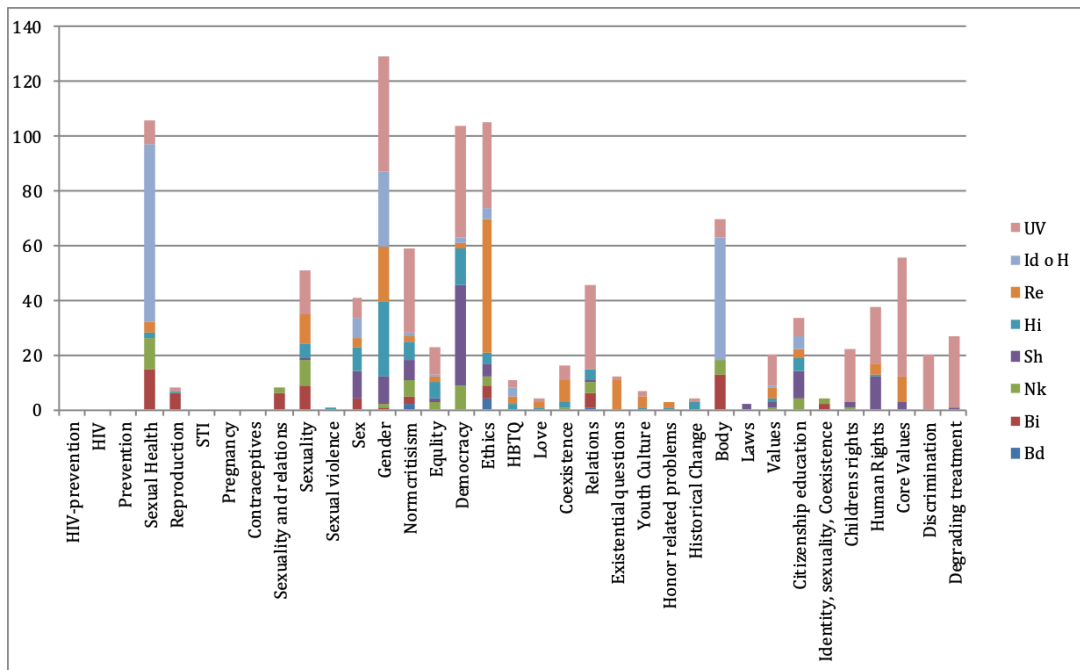


Figure 1. Diagram showing the total numbers of the indicator words for course syllabi in the subjects of: Art, Biology, History, Physics, Science, Religion Education and Social science, for student teachers for grades 7-9 and upper secondary school, from all universities in Sweden.

In this diagram, we find two main clusters. To the left are indicators that belong to the subjects of history, religion and social science while the cluster to the right belongs mostly to the subject of education, (Sw. Utbildningsvetenskaplig kärna). It is noteworthy that HIV and STI prevention and reproduction is almost non-existent in the course syllabi, but the indicator prevention in general does have a high value and is present in several subject syllabi.

If we look at the subject of religion education, we see only the following indicators: sexual health, sexuality, gender, norm critical perspectives, equality, democracy, ethics, LGBTQ, love(!), family patterns, relations, existential questions, youth culture, honour-related violence, values, citizenship education, human rights, and core values/värdegrund. These indicate a wide variety of Sexuality and Relations Education within the subject of Religion Education in Sweden. The subject area is very broad, and it seems as if quite a large part forms parts of the content of RE in Sweden. This in turn indicates that the content in RE is reasonable in relation to the demands of an urgent and relevant Sexuality and Relations Education in Sweden.

The results support the fact that there is a great variety regarding Sexuality and Relations Education in a wide sense that student teachers students encounter

during their education. Many course syllabi show that Sexuality and Relations Education is most often present in courses labelled Education, but not in the subject syllabi and courses. The overall result is that 55% of all the courses have indicator(s) that suggest that they hold a content that relates to Sexuality and Relations Education in a broad sense. Therefore, comparing the mappings from 2004 and 2009, there has been a clear improvement, but it is still not a very positive result.

Once the above research project by the Folkhälsomyndigheten was completed, the worldwide #metoo – movement had raised demands regarding the need for more education in sexuality and relations including core values regarding controversial issues in Sweden. Also, the The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (*Skolinspektionen*) early in 2018 published their evaluation of the teachings of Sexuality and Relations Education in compulsory school. The main result was that the teaching of this subject area varies a lot in schools and, thus, they emphasized that teaching must be improved (*Skolinspektionen*, 2018).

Concluding comments

This chapter has mainly focused on the position of existential questions in general in the RE subject in compulsory school and upper secondary school as well as in the academic study of RE in teacher education programs in Sweden. Another focus of this chapter centered on the importance of Sexuality and Relations Education for teachers, based primarily on a report on the prevalence of Sexuality and Relations Education in various courses in the Swedish teacher education, but also on a questionnaire administered to student teachers about what they consider to be important in the area of Sexuality and Relations today.

The students in teacher education programs stated that Sexuality and Relations Education is both a necessary and a controversial issue, and they consider these issues urgent and important. This is valid for the wide range of content and perspectives that belong to the subject area of Sexuality and Relations Education; hence, the word play with the term (S)existential questions in the heading to this chapter.

Furthermore, Sexuality and Relations Education has been compulsory in Biology and RE in Sweden since 1955, and there is still a need to emphasize that it is a part of the subject RE. Considering that in the new National Curriculum of 2011 Sexuality and Relations Education should be part of every subject, there is much hope for the future regarding the factual teachings of the subject area. It still seems to be a controversial issue though and an area with a great variety in how it is highlighted in education in both compulsory school and upper secondary school. This is also a very tough issue for teacher education programs and, as a result, from the latest mapping of teacher education programs, there is still more hard work to be done in order to change this situation in the future.

Finally, the result of this chapter underscores the importance of existential questions in RE and stresses that Sexuality and Relations Education should have a prominent position in this context. There is great support regarding this subject area (on an individual level and a societal level) by students from all levels of the educational system, especially with regard to the #metoo-movement and the latest report from Skolinspektionen, 2018 (Jönsson & Liljefors Persson, 2006; Folkhälsomyndigheten 2017, Skolinspektionen 2018). (S-)existential questions should have a strong places in RE-syllabi and teaching content on all levels of the educational systems, from compulsory school to upper secondary school and in teacher education programs.

There have been demands from researchers and politicians as well as from various organizations and institutions that teacher education need to carry out training in sexuality and relations education and make it mandatory in all the teacher programs, which will be formalized in 2021. Therefore, there is a lot and hard work to be done on this matter and there will also be a need for continual education courses for teachers as well. All this shows that there clearly are possibilities for further development and that the direction forward could only get better. There is a strong consensus among students from all educational levels that this subject area is both interesting and urgent and as a whole needs to be formulated in a continual dialogue with the surrounding society.

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