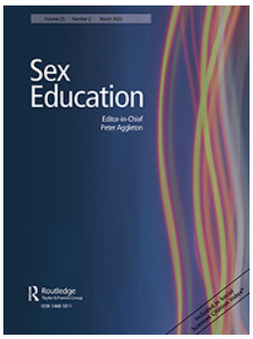

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Sexuality, Society and Learning

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/csed20

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To cite this article: Elin Biström (29 Mar 2025): Narratives of change in sexuality education: an analysis of Swedish lower secondary level textbooks, Sex Education, DOI: 10.1080/14681811.2025.2482087

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2025.2482087

Published online: 29 Mar 2025.

SEX EDUCATION
https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2025.2482087

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Narratives of change in sexuality education: an analysis of Swedish lower secondary level textbooks

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ABSTRACT

Sexuality is a key aspect of life and health, and representations of historical change are a central part of sexuality education. This article examines how narratives of change are constructed in textbook content on sexuality. Its aim is to analyse narratives of change as portrayed in Swedish textbooks for early teenagers. Data were collected from Swedish textbooks and analysed using thematic analysis. Key findings included a tendency towards the use of teleological narratives of change alongside 'non-controversial' utopian goals. Change regarding sex and sexuality was commonly constructed as moving from discrimination to tolerance, and from beliefs to knowledge. The textbooks seldom discussed the political dimensions of change and were frequently marked by a consensus-orientation, obscuring underlying conflicts. These factors limit the abilities of textbooks to support the development of action competence among young people regarding sex and sexuality.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 28 September 2024
Accepted 17 March 2025

KEYWORDS
Biology; dehistoricisation; narratives; religious education; sexuality

Introduction

Sexuality is an aspect of life in which the private and public domains intertwine. It is often framed as private and natural, but is simultaneously marked by surveillance and control (Takhar 2015). One might argue that complexity is the hallmark of sexuality, and that sexual rights, too, are multifaceted – being connected to economic, social, cultural, and political rights (Miller 2000).

Good quality sexuality education can contribute to an individual's development and well-being by supporting the making of healthy and informed choices (Palmer et al. 2017; Parker, Wellings, and Lazarus 2009). It can provide individuals with the necessary information, skills, and attitudes to understand and manage their sexual health, relationships, and identities. It is essential to prepare young people to participate in society as active citizens (Goldman 2008) and one way of doing this is through the promotion of sexual health (Loeber et al. 2010). School-based sexuality education plays a vital role in advancing all young people's sexual and reproductive health and rights by fostering equitable access to essential skills and information (Walker et al. 2022).

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This article examines how the textbooks used in lower secondary education in Sweden – including biology, religious education, and a specialised NGO textbook – construct narratives of change in sexuality education. The analysis highlights how these narratives tend to oversimplify and obscure the deeper political, cultural and historical dynamics at work. As such, the article offers a critical perspective on how educational materials construct conceptions of sex and sexuality, and possible consequences of these constructions for young people's understandings and lives.

Narratives of change and the role of textbooks

Narratives of change and representations of contrasts in space and time are crucial for describing historical trajectories and understanding the present. In particular, they shape descriptions of current circumstances and inform visions of the future. They also help explain how events unfold and clarify who and what is involved. A fundamental goal of education is to impact human behaviour, ideally creating conditions for action and support to students in becoming active citizens (Chen and Liu 2020). Since 'critical reflection on different personal and cultural perspectives can enhance creativity and broaden knowledge of action possibilities' (Sass et al. 2020), narratives that situate curriculum content within a social and historical context are essential for supporting the development of both knowledge and the ability to act in students. In this regard, textbooks can present 'a window on the constructions of the past through which we can view the constructions of the present' (Issitt 2004, 691).

How other places and times are described can serve to preserve the status quo. Narratives about progress may create distance by suggesting that injustice and oppression are phenomena confined to the past and therefore unrelated to the present situation (Jimenez 2019). In this way, the notion that something is 'better' in Sweden than elsewhere can render problems invisible and preserve existing hierarchies (Bredström 2005). Swedish biology textbooks, for instance, have been found to construct and reproduce Swedish whiteness through 'happy stories' of Swedish exceptionalism in sexuality education (Fingalsson and Junkala 2025). In an analysis of Swedish sex-education guidelines and natural science textbooks, it was shown that narratives contributed to shaping sexual citizenship by promoting specific sexual behaviours as normative constraining a more inclusive and diverse understanding of sex and sexuality (Prytz 2024). Furthermore, historical perspectives in Swedish textbooks are often employed in ways that can be described as Othering (Ideland and Malmberg 2014). Similarly, dichotomies between unspecified Other cultures and Western sexual norms have been observed in Norwegian textbooks (Røthing and Svendsen 2011).

There are also indications that textbooks rarely provide multiple perspectives on historical processes (Kropman, van Boxtel, and van Drie 2020). Previous research has shown that historical contextualisations of gender issues are largely missing in Swedish civics textbooks (Ohlander 2010), and that this omission is problematic for content concerning gender equality (Biström and Lundström 2021). Moreover, historical contextualisation regarding male homosexuality is sometimes employed in ways that blur current sexual understandings and categorisations (Rind 1998).

The manner in which textbooks present their content can significantly impact how students perceive sex-related issues (Fehlbaum 2020). Textbooks are widely used in

schools (Blumberg 2008) and occupy a powerful position in society and educational systems (Honkasalo 2018). They serve as indicators of the information students are exposed to in the classroom (Wynes and Nicholas 2017) and play a central role in shaping the epistemological foundations of the culture in which they are created (Issitt 2004). Textbooks may also limit the understanding of the topics they cover (Snyder and Broadway 2004) and authorise societally established forms of knowledge (Luke, Castell, and Luke 1983). They shape the understanding of the topics they engage with (Selander 1988) and may also impact classroom practices (Commeyras 1996).

Teachers' lack of knowledge appears to be a problem for some aspects of sex and sexuality education (Ahlberg, Jylkäs, and Krantz 2001), compounded by a lack of specialised training in universities and colleges (Sherlock 2012). Teachers and school management sometimes feel insecure about the subject of sex and sexuality education, and increased teacher skills and confidence have accordingly been called for (Fisher and Cummings 2016). Knowledge gaps in teacher education may also create difficulties in identifying and addressing problematic textbook content (Blumberg 2008). Moreover, disparities in how sex and sexuality education are integrated into teacher training programmes indicate the need for systemic improvements to better prepare future educators (Liljefors-Persson 2020).

In addition to investigating the presence of topics in textbooks, it is important to examine how these topics are presented and discussed (Jimenez, Lerch, and Bromley 2017). The structured division between the content and its presenter may cause information in textbooks to appear more neutral than it really is (Luke, Castell, and Luke 1983). There are indications that both the textbooks' position within the education system and the rhetorical strategies they employ lead students to perceive textbooks as unbiased primary sources (Schrader and Wotipka 2011) rather than as 'social instrument[s] masterfully crafted to achieve a social end', which they ultimately are (Wineburg 1991, 502).

There are several reasons why Swedish textbooks provide an interesting focus for this analysis. Swedish sex and sexuality education has long been considered pioneering (Stendig-Lindberg 1974), and Sweden is often recognised as a global leader in the field, aligning with its reputation for gender equality and commitment to human rights (Sherlock 2012). Swedish sex and sexuality education is cited internationally as setting a good example (Goldman 2008). In Swedish debate, schools are viewed as appropriate and essential arenas for delivering sex education (Bolander 2009). Notably, in 1955, Sweden became the first country in Europe to make sexuality education mandatory (Parker, Wellings, and Lazarus 2009). Over time, educational materials in Sweden have been developed to address some of the deficiencies in school-based sex and sexuality education (Bolander 2009). Research indicates that Swedish students often find sex and sexuality education lacking in quality and focused on the wrong topics (Thorsén, Aneblom, and Gemzell-Danielsson 2006). It has furthermore been argued that important areas are neglected (Ekstrand et al. 2011) and that current content remains too limited (Ekstrand et al. 2007).

Design and data

The study focused on sexuality-related content in Swedish textbooks for early teenagers. In particular, it analysed the most popular biology and religious

education textbooks used in lower secondary school (grades 7–9, ages 13–15), where sexuality education is given special attention. In Sweden, lower secondary education is compulsory, and sexuality education is mandatory, interdisciplinary, and integrated into various subjects across the curriculum (Skolverket 2024). Biology and religious education textbooks were selected because these subjects give a prominent emphasis to sexuality education in Swedish syllabuses – a conclusion drawn by comparing the frequency with which the terms sex* and sexuality are mentioned across them.[1] Previous research similarly indicates that sex and sexuality are more systematically addressed in biology and religious education (Larsson and Rosén 2006).

There are four leading publishers of textbooks for Swedish lower secondary education: Gleerups, Natur & Kultur, Liber, and Sanoma. This article analyses the newest editions of biology and religious education textbooks from these four publishers. The dataset included four biology titles (Andréasson et al. 2011; Fabricius, Holm, and Nystrand 2013; Henriksson 2015; Kukka et al. 2012), and four religious education titles (Berg and Rundblom 2014; Berlin and Ring 2019; Högberg, Isaksson, and Sundqvist 2014; Olofsson and Uppström 2014). These textbooks share substantial similarities in their structure and approach, typically spanning around 400 pages each, with only small portions of the books dedicated to sex and sexuality. The biology textbooks feature entire chapters on topics related to sex, sexuality and relationships, whereas the religious education textbooks include only limited mentions of these topics dispersed throughout the text. All of the textbooks have neutral titles that give the name of the subject, the intended grade level(s), and the name of the textbook series. For a more detailed analysis of the textbooks' general content on sex and sexuality, see Biström (2021).

In addition, the dataset includes a more specialised 222-page textbook (Simonsson 2018) from Sweden's most prominent sex and sexuality education NGO, RFSU (Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning/Swedish Association for Sexuality Education). RFSU has historically played a pivotal role in shaping discourse on sexuality education in Sweden (Lennerhed 2002; Milles et al. 2018; Thanem 2010), and the RFSU textbook, *Viktigast av allt: om kroppen, känslor och sex* (Most Important of All: About the Body, Feelings and Sex), differs from the biology and religious education titles by being more exclusively and explicitly focused on sex and sexuality education. It was included to demonstrate how educational materials for the same age group can explore similar topics from a different perspective when given more space to do so. Together, this sample represents a broad selection of content about sex and sexuality in Swedish textbooks, covering both the natural and social sciences, as well as providing a perspective from Sweden's most influential sex and sexuality education NGO.

This article uses thematic analysis to identify patterns in narratives of change – storylines that describe and interpret societal transformations over time. Identifying these narratives involved recognising implicit or explicit stories about how societal or cultural views have evolved. First, the material on sexuality in the textbooks was read with a focus on these narratives of change. Second, relevant sections were selected, more closely read, and coded. From the identified codes, three themes – visible in the headings of the findings below and representing key patterns of meaning in the narratives of change – were generated (Clarke and Braun 2017; Braun, Clarke, and Hayfield 2019). This process entailed comparing tentative themes

to the identified codes and re-reading the textbook content iteratively. Both explicit content and latent meanings were taken into consideration throughout the analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006). It is important to consider not only what was explicitly discussed but also what is omitted, as these omissions can be a more significant issue than explicitly problematic statements in sex and sexuality education textbooks (Reiss 1998).

All excerpts from the textbooks have been translated from Swedish to English by the author, striving to stay as close to the original meaning as possible.

Findings

Three general themes were generated by analysing narratives of change in the textbooks. The first theme concerned a movement from discriminatory attitudes to increased tolerance; the second was a transition from beliefs to knowledge; and the third was the notion of consensus rather than conflict being the driving force behind change.

Tolerance versus discrimination

A key theme in the textbooks' narratives was the shift from discriminatory attitudes to more tolerant ones. The textbooks frequently depicted contemporary Swedish society as highly tolerant while simultaneously acknowledging the persistence of intolerant attitudes. One example of this narrative was the depiction of changed attitudes towards non-heteronormative monogamous relationships in a biology textbook:

> Views on family and marriage have also varied. The Christian attitude to marriage was early on that a man and a woman should live in a lifelong relationship. This also applies to other religions, and such relationships are therefore very common all over the world. But in the mountainous regions of the Himalayas it occurs that a woman lives with several men, and in some parts of Africa, several women can form a family with the same man. In Sweden today, there are many different kinds of families. Far from all children live with both biological parents. (Andréasson et al. 2011, 276)

This quote depicts the shift from historically religious times, when only one family structure was accepted, to an implied greater tolerance in contemporary society. Narratives such as this can be described as reproducing a 'tolerance discourse' (Sherlock 2012) that acknowledges the existence of the other while still othering them (Larsson and Rosén 2006), whereby tolerance becomes a means of containment (Miller 2000). This same discourse frames the depicted others as objects of tolerance rather than as equal subjects (Wilmot and Naidoo 2014). A study of Norwegian textbooks found that explicit claims of tolerance were coupled with intolerant descriptions (Røthing and Svendsen 2011), and Swedish textbooks have also been observed to feature normative content incompatible with tolerance (Biström 2021).

In one of the religious education textbooks, current public tolerance towards different sexual orientations is described as follows: 'Today, most people in Sweden seem to agree that everyone has the right to love who he or she wants' (Olofsson and Uppström 2014, 268). This change is attributed to secularisation, growing prosperity, and the work of the

NGO RFSL (p. 268).[2] However, it is more common in religious education and biology textbooks not to provide this kind of further explanation.

The following quote from a religious education textbook provides another example of a contrast being drawn between the present and earlier times:

> Sexual orientation varies. People can be heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual. This has probably been the case in all times and all cultures. In our time, the attitude toward homosexuals has become very permissive. Humans have different sexual orientations. That's just the way it is. (Högberg, Isaksson, and Sundqvist 2014, 163)

This description of a 'very permissive' society is contradicted in the same section by a description of homophobia. The quote below follows directly after the previous one.

> 'There is no place for fags on the field', it was said in a paper. In elite football, crude jokes occur in the locker room where you are supposed to be a manly man. 'You fucking fag' is a so-called playful expression. To come out with one's identity there … Impossible! For the time being. But this too can change (Högberg, Isaksson, and Sundqvist 2014, 163).

Another example of such seemingly contradictory portrayals can be found in the following quote from a biology textbook:

> It is obvious and completely natural that love can be different for different people. Despite this, many people in our society still expect love to be heterosexual. This is a view that lingers from older times and contributes to prejudice. It manifests, for example, when unsympathetic people joke scornfully about homosexuals or bisexuals. […] For adolescents, there is often a second awakening a few years after puberty, when they realise that we are all the same regardless of our sexual orientation. The only difference is which person you fall in love with. (Henriksson 2015, 149)

In a later section of the same textbook, the following description is presented:

> There is still *homophobia* in society. […] This [occurs] despite the fact that it is obvious and completely natural that love can be in different ways in different people. (Henriksson 2015, 171)

Descriptions that employ terms like 'obvious' and 'completely natural' can be seen as examples of dehistoricisation (Bourdieu 2001), since they tend to overlook the conditions required for change. Such descriptions promote a narrative of growing tolerance in society over time, paired with an individual transformation that portrays the passage of time as reducing discriminatory attitudes. However, historical research provides a more nuanced perspective, showing that our thinking about sexuality both evolves and shows certain continuities over time (Soble 2009). The coexistence of continuity and change in sexual scripts (Masters et al. 2013) is absent from these narratives. When narratives ignore this dynamic process and instead portray historical change as a singular transformation, they contribute to a process that represents historically contingent and continuously reproduced social structures as timeless, essential, and immutable (Bourdieu 2001). In such accounts of change, the complexity of historical development is oversimplified into a linear progression, thereby neglecting the interplay between continuity and change in societal perceptions and practices, and ultimately creating a misleading impression of stability and inevitability.

Narratives like these can also be characterised as symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001), as they downplay the seriousness of homophobia and obscure its consequences by using mitigating terms such as 'unsympathetic' and 'joke'. Such observations echo previous findings that there is a lack of explanation for how tolerant attitudes can coexist with homophobia, which is linked to an absence of discussion regarding the origins of the latter (Larsson and Rosén 2006). They also relate to earlier findings showing that descriptions of change as something that 'just happens' obscure the role of women's actions in challenging gender discrimination (Commeyras 1996).

In the textbooks analysed, narratives employing teleological ideas of progress – describing contradictory observations as surprising or impossible to understand – are also evident. This is similar to findings in Swedish sexuality education for immigrants, where the notion that homosexual individuals 'still' find it difficult 'even' in Sweden, is reproduced (Bredström 2005). Describing tolerance as 'natural' and 'just the way it is' makes it very difficult to explain contradictory tendencies and can be understood as producing 'permanence in and through change' (Bourdieu 2001, 91), since representations of superficial changes can help maintain broader social structures and their associated hierarchies.

Knowledge versus beliefs

A second theme identifies how textbooks tend to portray history as progressing from beliefs to knowledge. While it is important to describe how perceptions of sexuality evolve over time, this theme focuses on a particular rhetorical representation of the progression of knowledge when describing change. Textbooks sometimes depict processes in which discoveries transform incorrect understandings into more accurate ones. The idea that modern conceptions are based on facts, rather than myths, permeates these descriptions. A scientific and universal worldview is positioned in contrast to a mythical-religious one, in which knowledge is constrained by myths rather than facts (Husserl 1970). Such descriptions also tend to frame 'culture' in negative terms as in the following quote from a biology textbook:

> When it comes to people and sex, nothing is self-evident. Man is shaped by his culture. The view of sex has therefore changed through the ages and in different parts of the world [. . .] Throughout all times and in all cultures, there has been some perception of what is man's 'natural' sexuality. In most cases, it has been based on religious beliefs rather than science. (Andréasson et al. 2011, 276)

This quote states that sexuality is culturally shaped but presents a dichotomy between religious beliefs and scientific knowledge, with the latter implicitly suggested as superior. The idea of changing 'perceptions' – in which knowledge becomes more accurate over time – represents a simplified view of how such change occurs, failing to consider the cultural and political underpinnings of these processes. Such descriptions fail to acknowledge that historical understandings of sexuality are influenced by a complex mix of legal, moral, theological, and medical perspectives, and that distinctions between these are not always clear (De Block and Adriaens 2013). For example, although the anatomy of the clitoris was known to the medical community since 1844, inaccurate portrayals persisted

in anatomical textbooks well into the 21st century (O'Connell, Sanjeevan, and Hutson 2005).

A good example of the portrayed progression from beliefs to knowledge can be seen in the subject of the vaginal corona – or hymen – which is covered in all biology textbooks. For a long time, the hymen was commonly referred to as the *mödomshinna* (literally membrane of virginity) in Swedish. Starting in 2009, the term *slidkrans* (vaginal corona) was promoted by RFSU in an attempt to counter efforts to oppress women's sexuality (Milles 2011), and this seems to have affected the understanding of the concept (Milles et al. 2018).

All of the biology textbooks contain relatively extensive discussion of the vaginal corona, with reference to changing perceptions about it. In each, the term vaginal corona is presented as the correct terminology to use, whereas the term *mödomshinna* is presented as a problematic concept. Two of the section headings in biology textbooks stress this. In one of them, the section heading reads, 'Membrane of virginity, a myth!' (Kukka et al. 2012, 228) and in the other it says, 'There is no membrane of virginity' (Andréasson et al. 2011, 281), indicating that this is an important area in which to correct misconceptions. Descriptions in textbooks often imply that both terminology and understanding have changed over time, as in the following example:

> About one centimeter from the vaginal opening is the *vaginal corona*, which was previously called the membrane of virginity. It is not a membrane but a corona of thin and stretchy folds in the mucous membrane. These may rupture and start to bleed when the vaginal opening is stretched for the first time, e.g., in connection with first intercourse. How thick and stretchy the mucous membrane folds are varies, and about half of all women do not bleed at first intercourse. The folds remain throughout life, even after intercourse and childbirth. Contrary to many people's beliefs, it is not possible to tell if a woman is a virgin or not, simply by looking. (Henriksson 2015, 152)

Relatedly, the following quotes from two biology textbooks illustrate how change is described as progressing towards more accurate knowledge and indicates that scientific discoveries, rather than social and political processes, drive such change:

> Another name for the vaginal corona is hymen [*oskulden* in Swedish] or 'virginity'. Unfortunately, the name has led to the misunderstanding that there is a full-covering membrane over the vaginal opening that breaks during the first intercourse. In certain cultures, it has been important that 'virginity' remains intact until the wedding night. (Fabricius, Holm, and Nystrand 2013, 379)

> Inside the opening of the vagina is the *vaginal corona*. This is a round fold of mucous membrane with an opening in the middle. There is no membrane covering the opening as was once thought, what was then called the membrane of virginity. But the idea lives on that there exists a membrane that breaks at first intercourse. In some cultures, there is a requirement of blood on the sheets after the wedding night. (Andréasson et al. 2011, 281)

Explanations of the origin and function of the discussed beliefs are generally very brief in the textbooks. For example, in the quotes below from a biology textbook, 'old traditions' related to weddings are mentioned without any detailed discussion, and the social and political aspects of the described changes remain unclear:

> Girls often have mucosal folds a few centimetres inside the vaginal opening called the vaginal corona or hymen. It looks different in every girl. Intercourse does not affect the appearance of the vaginal corona. In earlier times, one spoke of a membrane that could rupture at first intercourse, but this has been proved to be a misconception that has led to many misunderstandings. In fact, it is common for girls to make it through their first intercourse without bleeding. (Kukka et al. 2012, 228)

> The myth of the vaginal corona probably comes from older traditions in which young girls were married off to grown men. (Kukka et al. 2012, 229)

While it is positive that textbooks discuss problematic notions concerning the vaginal corona, the suggestion that changes in terminology have been driven by scientific discovery rather than by political work by advocates for gender equality downplays the importance of political advocacy and organising for change. There is a tendency in all of the textbooks to shy away from discussion of the political dimensions of history, opting instead for the use of terms such as 'misunderstandings', 'beliefs', and 'previously talked about' in ways that obscure political and social factors. This constitutes a form of symbolic violence in the form of:

> [A] gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition or even feeling (Bourdieu 2001, 1–2).

Euphemisms such as those described above can be seen as a way of toning down the more violent aspects of historical events and change (Jimenez 2019). Since issues deemed 'cultural' can also be understood and addressed from a medical perspective (Ayuandini 2017; Van Moorst et al. 2012), it is not necessary for biology textbooks to present their content in this softened manner. Current discussion about the vaginal corona in these textbooks exemplifies a teleological utopian narrative in which changes are portrayed as part of a process towards an ideal state.

Another common aspect of narratives of change is the tendency towards Othering, which involves placing problematic aspects in distant places or times, as the quotes above show. Such descriptions align with teleological narratives in which 'primitive' societies are seen as analogous to the West's past. In contrast to the textbooks in religious education and biology, the RFSU textbook discusses the political aspects of the problem more explicitly, and avoids situating it primarily among Others, or in the past:

> Some people believe that there is a membrane that covers the vaginal opening and that it breaks the first time you have intercourse. They have been told that if you bleed, it shows that it is your first intercourse. But this is not true. That there is a membrane is something that has been invented in order to limit and control women's sexuality. In many contexts, it is still a kind of rule that girls should not have intercourse before marriage. The same rule does not usually apply to boys. (Simonsson 2018, 211)

This example illustrates how discussion about the hymen can be framed as a social and political issue rather than a progression in knowledge. While it does not extensively explore the origins of these events, the RFSU textbook's narrative significantly differs from that of other textbooks by avoiding a teleological narrative and refraining from creating temporal and spatial distance from problematic beliefs.

Consensus versus conflict

The studied textbooks rarely discuss what drives societal change, often presenting it as a smooth, uncontested process shaped by general agreement. This framing conceals the importance of political struggles, group interests, and structural factors in shaping progress or resistance to it. Change is frequently depicted as automatic and universally positive, which depoliticises and dehistoricises the ongoing construction of societal norms, making them appear fixed and inevitable. Explicit reference to political action is scarce. An exception can however be found in a religious education textbook, which attributes increased tolerance towards different sexual orientations to secularisation, economic growth, and the advocacy efforts of non-governmental organisations:

> But without organisations like the RFSL (the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex rights) which, among other things, are behind the pride festivals, this probably wouldn't have happened so quickly. (Olofsson and Uppström 2014, 268)

This description is an important exception because it explicitly mentions the importance of the political struggle for change. However, it is still notable how the quote reduces the role of political organisation to simply speeding up a process that is assumed to be taking place anyway. The common omission of political agency from these textbooks contributes to dehistoricisation, and not discussing what drives change makes it difficult to understand the power relations at play in bringing about this change. Similarly, the role of political conflict is largely underdeveloped (Biström and Lundström 2021). Narratives marked by consensus do not encourage political action, as progressive change is portrayed as occurring more or less by itself, with the end of the process seemingly near. In this way, portrayals of consensus may even be harmful to democracy (Mouffe 1993).

The RFSU textbook, on the other hand, portrays the political aspects of sexuality more clearly and explicitly. It includes a preface entitled 'You are important', which features the following statement:

> That something has been a certain way for a long time doesn't mean it has to stay that way. When you want to change something in society or life - and you will want to do that - you need the help of others. It may not happen fast, and sometimes patience is required, but almost everything will be easier if we do it together. (Simonsson 2018, 7)

Here, the need for political organisation is highlighted, and historical developments are contextualised with a focus on individual and collective action. At the same time, however, this kind of narrative can obscure other aspects of historical change, such as the impact of economic factors. Focusing disproportionately on individual political action may be incongruent with presenting a realistic and accurate historical narrative, even though it can positively contribute to action competence. Another problem is that political action here is described as always leading towards positive, liberating goals, thereby downplaying its potentially non-democratic effects (Butler 2024).

In the chapter on gender in the RFSU textbook, entitled 'Femininity and masculinity', there is a section under the heading 'Change is possible', which begins with the following statement:

> We know that change is possible. It happens all the time! But nothing happens by itself. The rights that exist in Sweden today are the result of a long and persistent struggle. (Simonsson 2018, 82)

Here too, change is described as driven by struggle and conflict and as an ongoing process, in contrast to the consensus-oriented approach adopted by the other analysed textbooks.

Discussion

To deal with complexity and understand themselves and their society, students need to grasp historical processes and the intricacies of social change – especially regarding sex and sexuality education. While the textbooks analysed here engage with change over time, there are problematic aspects to how such narratives of change are formulated.

The textbooks generally present one-sided narratives that do not support students by providing the theoretical tools needed to engage with complex issues and problems. A common feature across all three themes is the use of teleological narratives of increasing enlightenment and gradually accumulating knowledge (Carr 2017), alongside a utopian vision of a 'good' future society (Mannheim 1939). In general, there is a tendency to depict the ongoing production of knowledge as a process of increasing enlightenment, presenting utopian visions of a future society which we are heading towards automatically. Findings from this study reveal a standard narrative in which previous faulty beliefs are replaced by correct knowledge and discriminatory attitudes are portrayed as evolving into widespread tolerance. Furthermore, conflicts are often obscured in favour of narratives of change marked largely by general consensus. Representations of a teleological history of the West, along with depictions of changes from unfounded beliefs to increased knowledge, are contrasted with portrayals of past and contemporary others. These representations constitute an Othering of both past and present cultures.

Presenting tolerance as the norm and the logical outcome of accepting truth, without addressing how prejudice and discrimination fit into this framework, renders such contradictions hard to understand. Education needs to provide comprehensive information on sensitive and contested topics that are sometimes difficult to describe, discuss, and handle. It is essential to remember that even the structures that reproduce disadvantages for some groups can be changed (Masters et al. 2013). Sexual competence is also relational and dependent on context and other actors (Van de Bongardt and de Graaf 2020), as agency requires access to options that are both legally sanctioned and socially supported (Miller 2000). Factors such as social class and gender further shape an individual's ability to act in ways that promote a healthy and autonomous sexuality (Higgins and Browne 2008). The textbooks' inability to meaningfully contextualise discriminatory attitudes renders intolerance incomprehensible as part of narratives of ongoing progress towards consensus and harmony.

Underdeveloped discussions of political struggles may be attributed to the dominant liberal framework's inability to understand the role of political action and political movements. Since political action cannot be conceptualised in individualistic terms within the frameworks the textbooks offer, it is usually deemed pathological or irrational (cf. Mouffe 1993). Consequently, historical agency is perceived as residing in teleological individuals acting towards predefined goals, which helps explain the widespread appeal of historical teleology from the nineteenth century onward (Carr 2017). If education

focuses solely on individual moral responsibilities and neglects to provide understanding of the complexity of social change, students risk 'becoming moral captives in the prevailing societal system' with a limited understanding of the problems and the ways to address them (Stagell et al. 2014, 109).

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the fact that it does not examine change over time in the leading publishers' textbooks. Older editions may still be present in schools and thus constitute a part of what students engage with. Another weakness is the fact that the study was not able to take into account how teachers and students interact with the textbooks in the classroom, particularly if alternative materials are used, potentially offering a more nuanced perspective on the descriptions students encounter.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how the textbooks used in Swedish lower secondary education construct narratives of change in sexuality education. The findings reveal a tendency towards teleological and consensus-oriented narratives that obscure political and historical factors influencing change, limiting students' ability to critically engage with these topics. While the study highlights these patterns, further research could usefully explore how teachers and students interact with the textbooks in practice, as well as the potential role of alternative materials in broadening young people's perspectives.

Notes

1. Syllabi for Swedish school subjects are available online at: https://www.skolverket.se/undervisning/grundskolan/laroplan-och-kursplaner-for-grundskolan/kursplaner-for-grundskolan. The study involved searching for the term 'sex' (including all words starting with sex*) and counting the number of occurrences across the syllabi for each subject. Additionally, the analysis considered the prominence of the concept by examining its placement in the text, the context in which it appeared, and how it was addressed.
2. Note that the NGO RFSL (Riksförbundet för homosexuellas, bisexuellas, transpersoners, queeras och intersexpersoners rättigheter/The Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex rights) is distinct from the NGO RFSU.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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