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The practice of sexual education in Hungarian secondary grammar schools

PHD theses

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1 Introduction

Sexual education is one of the most important fields of education, since human sexuality and the relationships in which sexuality is lived out influence the quality of life in many ways. Still, in spite of the significance of this issue, sexual education in Hungary is relatively neglected in comparison to other areas of pedagogy. Several Hungarian experts working on this topic (e.g. *Berend and Péterfia*, 1998, *Buda*, 2006, *Szilágyi*, 2006, *Simich et al.*, 2010) have expressed their dissatisfaction with the results achieved so far. The same dissatisfaction seems to be typical of young people, who sexual education is aimed at. According to a 2008 survey conducted among 1.500 people, 97 % of the young informants were dissatisfied with the present way of sexual education because it does not adequately take feelings, partnerships and gender roles into consideration (*Kolonits and Tárkányi*, 2010).

2 The structure of the dissertation

The theoretical part of the study starts with the discussion of the *concept* of sexual education (Chapter 2). It looks at the definitions of sexual education in contemporary literature on sexual pedagogy, at the relationship of sexual education to other areas of education and, explicitly, at the significance of sexual education in mental health.

Chapter 3 sums up the characteristics of *modern sexual education* based on the relevant literature. It deals in detail with the issue of psychosexual development and psychosexual maturity as well as with the sexuality-related moral norms in our society. It also examines the goals and methods of modern sexual education according to international and Hungarian guidelines.

Chapter 4 deals with *international trends* in sexual education. It describes the historical background in general and then goes on to discuss the efforts made in the field of sexual education over the past few decades in particular.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the endeavours *in Hungary*. Special emphasis is laid on initiatives by the church since the research described in the second part of the dissertation also compares church-run and state-run schools with regard to sexual education.

Chapter 6 reviews the *legislative background* to sexual education in Hungary and especially the consecutive versions of the National Curriculum.

Chapter 7 analyses the *effectiveness* of sexual education in Hungary in the light of research results.

The second part of the dissertation describes the author's *empirical study*, which aimed at mapping the *practices of sexual education in Hungarian secondary schools* through interviews conducted with teachers and questionnaires filled in by students.

3 Questions and hypotheses

The empirical study was aimed at mapping the practices of sexual education in Hungarian secondary schools.

I wanted to find answers to the following questions:

- How much *time* is dedicated to sexual education in schools? Within what subject(s)? In what grades and for what age groups?
- What *content* and what *methodology* are used in the lessons?
- Is there any attention given to this issue outside lessons e.g. in *free-time activities*? What activities are they and how do the elements of sexual education appear in them?
- To what extent do the sexual education practices in schools fulfil the requirements of *modern sex education*?
- How do students *perceive* sexual education practices in schools? To what extent are they satisfied and where do they see a need for development?

The following hypotheses have been formulated:

- 1.) Teachers do not *consciously* deal with sexual education other than in biology, R.E. and homeroom classes specifically designated to the subject.
- 2.) In the majority of grammar schools sexual education is practically restricted to providing biological and health-related information.
- 3.) The primary method in the school lessons dedicated to sexual education is verbal discussion; other methodological tools (such as drama-based instruction, exercises for communication and skills development or works of art) are rarely used.
- 4.) Teachers do not consciously take advantage of the opportunities for sexual education during free-time activities in schools.
- 5.) Teachers rarely consult parents about the goals and content of sexual education.
- 6.) Students are not satisfied with the present practices of sexual education in schools.
- 7.) There is a difference between church-run and state-run schools: church-run schools put more emphasis on the moral aspects of relationships and sexuality.

- 8.) The expectations of boys and girls differ significantly: girls expect the school to take into consideration the emotional and psychological dimensions of relationships and sexuality, as well.

4 Sampling and research methods

4.1 Selecting the schools

Twelve secondary grammar schools in Hungary have been selected for research based on the following criteria:

1. School performance:

Based on the ranking of schools with regard to university admission rate of students, the schools have been divided into two groups: stronger (where, on average over the last five years, at least 76 % of students had been admitted to higher education) and weaker schools. The sample consists of:

- 5 schools from the 'strong' group
- 7 schools from the 'weak' group

2. Regional distribution:

- Budapest: 5 schools
- Transdanubian region: 3 schools
- Northern Hungary: 2 schools
- The Great Plain Region: 2 schools

3. School controlling authority:

- church-run institutions: 6 schools
- state- or municipality-run institutions: 6 schools.

4.2 Research tools

Two research tools have been used in the study:

- a questionnaire for students, and
- an interview outline for teachers.

4.3 Sampling in the schools

The questionnaire survey was administered in two classes of the 12th grade in each school (apart from schools where there is only one class in a grade) because it was this age group that could reflect on what had happened in the field of sexual education over the years they had spent at the school. (Of course, it is perfectly possible that the topic also came up in the last months of the 12th grade, after the questionnaires had been completed.) In most cases data was collected in homeroom classes, so students who were absent on that particular day could obviously not participate in the survey.

The total number of questionnaires completed was 478, which is 40 questionnaires per school on average.

With regard to the interviews, the aim was to conduct this part of the research with teachers who play a key role in sexual education in each school. The interviewees were selected following a consultation with the head teacher. In one of the schools the *school nurse* was also included in the survey. As a result, the number of interviews in total was 13.

5 Summarizing the outcomes of the research

This section provides an overview of the most important research results.

Firstly, let us look at the hypotheses one by one and check whether they have been confirmed or refuted.

Hypothesis 1: Teachers do not *consciously* deal with sexual education other than in biology, R.E. and homeroom classes specifically designated to the subject.

This hypothesis had to be refuted. The interviews suggested that several schools make efforts to include the topics of love, sexuality and partnerships in other classes – such as literature, arts, ethics, etc. – as well.

Hypothesis 2: In the majority of grammar schools sexual education is practically restricted to providing biological and health-related information.

This hypothesis had to be refuted. The schools in the sample (especially the church-run ones) seriously strive to take up the emotional, psychological, ethical and social aspects of sexuality and relationships. At the same time it cannot be claimed that sexual education is complex and holistic enough; students would like to deal with many of the topics in a much more profound manner.

Hypothesis 3: The primary method in the school lessons dedicated to sexual education is verbal discussion; other methodological tools (such as drama-based

instruction, exercises for communication and skills development or works of art) are rarely used.

This hypothesis has practically been confirmed. Although some teachers try to expand their methodological toolkit, it is basically true that verbal discussion dominates sexual education in schools, the only exception being educational and other films. Communication and skills development exercises or elements of drama-based instruction are hardly present.

Hypothesis 4: Teachers do not consciously take advantage of the opportunities for sexual education during free-time activities in schools.

This hypothesis had to be refuted. A number of schools organize free-time activities that deliberately provide framework for sexual education as well.

Hypothesis 5: Teachers rarely consult parents about the goals and content of sexual education.

This hypothesis has been confirmed. According to the statements of teachers, consultation with parents is almost completely lacking.

Hypothesis 6: Students are not satisfied with the present practices of sexual education in schools.

This hypothesis has been confirmed. Although there are differences with regard to what students are more or less satisfied with in the various schools, the total level of satisfaction among students is low.

Hypothesis 7: There is a difference between church-run and state-run schools: church-run schools put more emphasis on the moral aspects of relationships and sexuality.

This hypothesis has been confirmed. It was also clear that the church-run schools in the sample also pay more attention to the psychological dimension of relationships and sexuality.

Hypothesis 8: The expectations of boys and girls differ significantly: girls expect the school to take into consideration the emotional and psychological dimensions of relationships and sexuality, as well.

This hypothesis has been confirmed. The expectations of girls in this regard were much higher than those of boys both in church-run and in state-run schools.

All in all, the status of sexual education in secondary grammar schools is somewhat better than what we had expected based on the dissatisfaction of Hungarian experts:

- There are teachers who are committed to giving sexual education in schools and actively search for the best possible methods.

- Several institutions have realized that sexual education is a task that needs to be carried out in the *school as a whole* and by a number of teachers and professionals.
- Some of the teachers dealing with sexual education are aware of the fact that students need more than simple biological or health-related sexual information. In many cases they actively strive at applying a more complex approach to sexual education.
- Many schools include sexual education in their extracurricular programmes, as well (e.g. camps, class weekends, retreats, project days or community programmes at student homes).
- A number of institutions rely on the help of various civil organisations in sexual education.

At the same time, we have found serious shortcomings in a number of areas:

- The *methodological repertoire* of teachers dealing with sexual education is not satisfactory.
- *Students' needs are not assessed*; therefore, sexual education cannot be tailored to meet their expectations.
- Taking into consideration the needs and interests of students, the *time* allocated to sexual education is far *too little*. Also, there are a number of issues that are not dealt with in adequate depth.
- *Consultation* and cooperation *with parents* in questions of sexual education is almost completely *lacking*.
- *Teachers* within the same school *do not even consult each other* about matters of sexual education.
- *No curricula have been developed* in schools. Teachers are left on their own and the quality of sexual education depends on the agility and engagement of individual teachers.
- Few teachers attend *trainings* preparing them for working in this field.

6 Proposals for development

Based on the research results, a number of proposals for development have been outlined. They target steps that lie within the scope of individual schools:

- The management of secondary grammar schools should encourage a number of colleagues to attend trainings related to the topic (mainly in order to expand their methodological repertoire) and should financially support the participation of the teachers.
- It would be worth to raise the issue of sexual education in the staff meeting of the teachers and then appoint a working group to develop the detailed curriculum or the individual programme at the school. The programme could involve teachers of different subjects, form teachers, the school doctor, the school nurse or the school psychologist.
- When developing the programme, the needs of students should be taken into consideration. Needs can be assessed on the own initiative of the schools (e.g. by way of anonymous questionnaires).
- Similarly, programmes should be developed in consultation with the parents.
- The complex and detailed sexual education programme can be included into the individual pedagogical programme of the school. The programme can be realized by allocating a specific timeframe to this issue from the timeframe of a number of subjects or by linking extracurricular activities to it. This way, all students of the school can participate in the whole programme.
- Obviously, the proposals above have financial repercussions; therefore, it is reasonable to look for external funds which might be provided by the controlling authority, the state or the European Union.

7 Selected literature

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