

English Literature and Sexuality

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ABSTRACT

This article interviews four teachers about the inclusion of literature dealing with sexuality and gender choice within the English-language classroom. The teachers report that traditional textbooks do not contain much material on the topic, although students seem willing to engage in discussion about sexuality in English. In addition, students have often acquired their English-language sexual vocabulary from pornography. Here reading and discussing literature could help them develop a more widely useful vocabulary.

KEYWORDS

Sexuality, ESL, English Curriculum

1. Introduction

Through conversation with one of my teachers, I was made aware that In Norway, there have been little, maybe even no, research regarding how you can approach the issue of sexuality in the English language classroom with the help of literature (Myren-Svelstad, personal conversation, March 3rd, 2020). According to the current curriculum from 2006, the topic of sexuality is supposed to be integrated into several subjects, such as religion, social science, and science/biology (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016). In these subjects, there are different aspects of sexuality that teachers need to address. In science/biology, the topic of sexuality is supposed to be related to health care and reproduction. It should also include sexual orientation and the bodily changes that happen during puberty (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013). In social science, it is supposed to include teachings about different family situations, sexual orientation, and different variations of sexual norms (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013). In religion, however, it is supposed to be about sexuality and ethical questions (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2016).

I think that this topic should not just be addressed in these three subjects, but that it should also be included in English language instruction. Since sexuality is a topic of interest and importance to young people, it is natural that issues around how to talk about sexuality are brought up in the English subject, along with the other areas of instruction. Teachers can use discussions of sexuality in English to also teach about how different English-speaking cultures address issues relating to privacy, family structure, marriage laws, reproduction, and social inclusion. Sexuality is a part of life, and discussions about sexuality should be integrated in all subjects.

On this topic, there has been done little research here in Norway. In order to help fill this gap, I surveyed six teachers about their attitudes towards including discussions of sexuality in their English classes, and will discuss four of these interviews here. The teachers all work in a small school outside of Trondheim. The school has 350 students from the town and nearby districts enrolled in 8th – 10th grade and 50 employees. The school had just been through a case or event where some of the boys had made up sexualized nicknames for all of the girls and also made a list where they ranked the other students' attractiveness. I thought that the teachers in this

school would have given some thought to the importance of teaching about sexuality in all subjects.

The survey was conducted in Microsoft Forms, and it was anonymous. One advantage of the survey being anonymous is that it is easier to answer honestly and not give answers that you think someone wants. The benefit of this method, in general, is that the teachers themselves could decide when they had the time to participate in the survey and use as much time as they wanted. The disadvantage was that I could not go back and ask follow-up questions when the answers were ambiguous.

2. Teacher's perspectives and practices

The teachers who participated in my survey emphasized the importance of addressing the issue of sexuality in their classroom, but only a few of them had done so. The ones who had included discussions of sexuality in their classrooms had used different ways to approach the topic. What follows is a brief profile of 4 teachers, two who have worked with addressing the issue of sexuality and two who hadn't. Originally there were 6 teachers that participated in the survey, but some of them only answered with few words and were not interested in discussing topic of sexuality in language instruction. Because of that I only included the four teachers in my discussion.

Carol

Carol is one of the teachers who has worked to address the issue of sexuality in her classroom. She teaches 8th – 10th grade, and at the time of this study, she taught 9th. Carol had previously worked with the topic of sexuality; she had decided to use a text about discovering one's sexuality, and it so happened that one of her students found out that he was attracted to another student of the same gender during that semester. She mentions that she sometimes finds it challenging to address this topic because of the age gap between herself and her students, and that this has become a challenge more so now than earlier in her career. One of the problems that the students might face while talking about this topic is their lack of vocabulary to express themselves and their feelings. Because they lack the vocabulary needed to talk about this topic, it

might also be hard for them to ask for help. Carol thinks that this topic might be harder for some students to talk about and especially if they have to look for words in a foreign language.

On the other hand, some students find it easier to talk about and discuss the topics of sexuality when it is in another language. Carol believes that the foreign language gives them some distance. When asked about potential challenges for a teacher addressing the issue, Carol said that some adults have a problem with talking about and expressing their thoughts about sexuality to anyone, let alone teenagers. Carol is one of the teachers who thinks that literature could be used as a resource in the classroom when talking about sexuality. She mentions that any literature could help start a conversation or discussion and a new way of thinking. The last thing she says is that she thinks this topic is very important to address, mostly because the feeling of being alone with complicated feelings might be less heavy to handle, if the students know that there is a safe and tolerant place to discuss feelings and sexuality, maybe they won't feel so alone.

Carol is the only teacher that could recommend other literature that deals with this topic. Some of the books she recommended were *Brokeback Mountain* by Anne Proulx, *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, and *Rubyfruit Jungle* by Rita Mae.

Maria

Maria is one of the teachers who hasn't worked with the topic of sexuality. She also teaches 8th – 10th grade, but the focus will be on her 9th-grade class and the work she has done there. Maria believes that there are few resources easily available for the teachers and that this is one of the reasons she does not work with the topic. Another reason she has chosen not to work with sexuality in the classroom is that the curriculum doesn't explicitly make room for this topic. Maria thinks it's challenging to talk about the issue of sexuality because it makes her uncomfortable. When asked about the student's challenges, she mentions that some of them are not mature enough to discuss it. Maria also mentioned that some of the students might have had experiences with abuse or harassment. This topic might be challenging to talk about because of this. She also thinks that the average teenagers think that this topic is embarrassing, and they can't stand it when their teacher is talking about genitals and naked bodies.

Maria believes, however, that a foreign language could be a good way to get the students to talk about the topic of sexuality. She thinks it makes the students more comfortable to talk about sexuality in English than in Norwegian. She believes that you could have some laughs along the way and, in some way, “camouflage” the discussion as being the language rather than the content that is embarrassing. One of the challenges that Maria fears that teachers might face in their classroom while discussing the topic of sexuality is that some of the students may have had negative sexual experiences. Maria thinks that using literature as a resource is a good way to avoid several embarrassing moments. She says that if you use literature, you don’t have to use your personal stories or experience. She also mentions that it is always useful and more comfortable to base your discussion on someone else and their experience rather than your own. Lastly, Maria says that even though the topic makes her uncomfortable, it’s an important topic to talk about and address in the classroom. In a time where the internet often is their primary source of information, teachers need to be a counterweight for teens who measure themselves with unrealistic descriptions of what a body should look like and what sex is supposed to be.

Eric

Eric is the second teacher that has worked with addressing the topic of sexuality. Eric also teaches 8th – 10th grade, but the focus will be on his 9th-grade students and what they have worked on in class. Eric has used text with topics as virginity, LGBTQ, adultery, and some other topics as a starting point for discussion. At the school he currently teaches at he has worked with text that deals with the matter of homosexuality and the issue of being transgender. For Eric, this topic is not a problem to address. He believes that it is natural to include sexuality as a part of instruction. Eric says that his students are also comfortable talking about sexuality in the classroom. The challenge that the students face is the lack of vocabulary. They don't have the vocabulary needed to discuss this topic out loud in the classroom. He adds that the vocabulary that the student does have on this topic is clearly influenced by pornography. Eric mentions that it can be a good thing to create a little distance with a foreign language, but as he has said, they still lack the vocabulary needed to address this topic in a healthy way.

Eric thinks that several teachers might find the topic of sexuality a bit awkward to talk about. Also, it's hard for the teacher to know what their students have experienced. Statistically, there will be some students in our class that have had some bad experiences, which can make it difficult and hard for them to participate in a class discussion about sexuality, he says. Another issue or challenge that Eric mentions is that some of the students might find it appropriate to utter inappropriate political statements and make jokes about the topic. Eric thinks that literature could be used as a resource to address sexuality if it is well-written because well-written prose could help link emotions to actions, and thus make it a more manageable topic to discuss, without it becoming embarrassing. On the question of whether this is an important topic to address in language class, he answers that it is. He states that it's on most of the students' minds constantly. He also believes that it is important that they get their information from their classroom, and not only from porn, YouTube, music videos, and reality shows.

Tom

Tom is the second teacher that hasn't worked with the topic of sexuality in his classroom. He also teaches 8th – 10th grade, but the focus will be on his 9th-grade class and the work he has done with those students. Tom says that the reason for his not working on the topic is that it hasn't come up yet in his textbook. Even though he has not talked about the matter of sexuality in the English classroom, he has spoken about it in science. Tom is very comfortable talking about sexuality as he worked with this topic for six weeks before Christmas last year. Tom thinks that some of the students might find it embarrassing to talk about sex and sexuality and that some of the students who speak the loudest, are often influenced by pornography. These are some of the challenges the students might face if sexuality is the topic of discussion.

Another thing he mentions is the language barrier. Some of the students don't possess the vocabulary they need to talk about and discuss this topic out loud in class. Some teachers might find it challenging to address the issue of sexuality because they are not sure of their own sexuality. Tom is one of the teachers that think that the vast selection of literature makes it easier to find relevant literature and interesting text about sexuality. He also mentions that the possibility of discussing sexuality in a foreign language can make it easier for students, provided

that they have the required vocabulary. Tom thinks that there are several reasons why addressing the issue of sexuality is important. One of the more important aspects of it is to prepare the students for the sexual side of life. In an increasingly sexualized society, the students must be given the opportunity to discuss what healthy sexuality is and how to be open and comfortable with you and your sexuality.

Summary of the teacher's perspectives

All of the teachers think this topic should be talked about and addressed in their classroom, but only two had done it. The two who had not worked with the issue of sexuality had different reasons for not dealing with the matter. Maria thinks that the resources are hard to find and that the curriculum does not make room for teachers to address this topic, whereas Tom hasn't had the time and the textbook does not address the topic. He has, however, worked with the theme of sexuality in his science class. Among the teachers who have integrated discussions of sexuality into their classes, Carol and Eric have both used authentic literature as a resource in their classroom and both of them have used texts that deal with homosexuality, transgenderism, and general sexuality. The one challenge they all mention is that the students might lack the vocabulary to address this topic in a foreign language. Some of the teachers point out that students with the vocabulary needed are influenced by pornography.

3. Discussion

As I presented in my introduction, I think it is essential to include the topic of sexuality in subjects like English and Norwegian as well as science, religion, and social science. The goal of this paper is to figure out whether English literature can be used as a resource when teachers are talking about or addressing the topic of sexuality in their classroom. When I look at the answers, I received from the teachers who participated in my survey, the answer is clear. English literature should be used as a resource when discussing the topic of sexuality as the topic is not generally covered in English textbooks in use in schools.

But to be able to use English literature, teachers need to know what is out there. Not everything is a good example, and that is why the teacher must read young adult books that deal

with sexuality and sexual content (Bott, 2006, p. 1). Some students are dependent upon getting recommendations from their teachers about what books they should read, but if the teachers don't know what is out there, they won't be able to make these recommendations. By reading about someone else's experience the students who struggle can find both help and comfort in knowing that they are not alone.

One of the teachers answered that she found it difficult to find texts that deal with the topic of sexuality. One of the articles I came across used *Honor Girl* (Thrash, 2015) and *Adrian and the Tree of Secrets* (Hubert & Calliou, 2014) as examples of appropriate literature. These are graphic novels that deal with the matter of sexuality. Both of the novels address the issue of sexuality as well as coming-of-age narratives and are highly relatable for young people (Kedley & Spiering, 2017, p. 60).

Some of the teachers were concerned that students might lack the vocabulary needed to be a part of the discussion of sexuality in the classroom. This suggests even more that discussions of sexuality belong in the language classroom. Sexuality is a part of life and culture, and students need to be prepared to discuss topics that are of interest to people in general. Steering away from teaching sexual vocabulary can lead, as several of the teachers noted, to students learning their language from pornography. Obviously, there can be negative repercussions if students use porn vocabulary in foreign language conversations.

The teachers who participated in my survey all agreed that the topic of sexuality belonged in the English classroom. They were all willing to do what they had to become more comfortable talking about it and also to find resources they could use in their classrooms. Also, they all agreed that literature could be used as a resource to address the topic of sexuality. Eric mentions that it is important for teachers to provide the students with the information that they need because then the student does not have to use the internet to figure things out. Tom says that the students would get a different starting point when it comes to dealing with the sexual aspects of life if they are used to talk about it. There comes a time where they begin to explore themselves, both alone and with others, and if they do have the knowledge, then they know what is ok and what is not ok. This can lead to students avoiding all those negative experiences when it comes to sexuality. Another thing is that students might become more enlightened and open-minded when it comes

to different aspects of sexuality. The students will most likely be introduced to others that have the same thoughts and feelings as themselves, and they might not feel so alone in this big world.

The questions asked in the survey

1. What is your gender?
2. Have you used any form of English literature to start a conversation about sexuality in your classroom? Please elaborate in question 3 or 4 depending on your answer
3. How have you used English literature to address the issue of sexuality in the classroom?
4. Why haven't you used English literature to discuss sexuality in the classroom?
5. Do you personally find it difficult to talk about sexuality with your students? Why/Why not?
6. What challenges, if any, do you think your students might face in discussing sexuality in the classroom?
7. Do you think addressing the issue of sexuality in a different language can make it easier for the students or more difficult? Why/Why not?
8. What potential challenges might a teacher face by addressing sexuality in their classroom?
9. In what way can English literature help you make it easier to address this topic?
10. As a teacher, do you think it's important to address the issue of sexuality? Why/ Why not?
11. Do you have any suggestions for books, short stories or poems that deal with this matter?
12. Do you have any additional thoughts on this topic?

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