
An empty arena – on attitudes to and experiences of sexuality education among special school and habilitation service staff in Sweden

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Abstract

Young people with intellectual disabilities (ID) grow up in environments strongly influenced by parents' and staff's values on gender, sexuality and disability. This may create barriers in promoting the youth's knowledge about their bodies and possibilities to sexual expression and sexual health. In this study, Swedish special needs school teachers and habilitation staff participated in nine focus group interviews, and shared their views and experiences of working with sexuality education. The data were analysed using the theory of Social Representations in order to capture the staff's everyday knowledge on sexuality and sexuality education. The data points to attitudes expressed both explicitly and implicitly, found on an individual as well as a structural level. E.g. sexuality among people with ID is largely seen as problematic and risky while pleasurable aspects are made invisible. Young people with ID are expected to take responsibility for possible risks in their surroundings while their sexuality is seen as different from others'. Stereotypes about gender and sexual expression are significant. Non-heterosexual persons with ID are present, although seen as a challenge to the daily work. Parents of the youth are seen as obstacles in the implementation of sexuality education. The professionals also express a lack of education and practice regarding sexuality education. Furthermore, they emphasize the need for leader support in order to establish professional self-esteem, as well as to allow for creativity and independence in the implementation of sexuality education. A norm critical (e.g. awareness of own values regarding gender, sexuality and disability, as well as a critical approach to current perceptions among colleagues or in society in general), more equivalent sexuality education that includes both risk reduction and positive and enjoyable aspects of sexuality, and a clear framework of the subject of sexuality education are recommended.

Keywords: Sexuality, intellectual disabilities, sexuality education, special schools

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