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**CAN YOU PLEASE HELP ME DRAW A VIBRATOR?**

*The challenge of balancing information on pleasure in sexuality education*

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# CAN YOU PLEASE HELP ME DRAW A VIBRATOR?

## THE CHALLENGE OF BALANCING INFORMATION ON PLEASURE IN SEXUALITY EDUCATION

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### Abstract

Sexuality education introduces several topics that can cause embarrassment and discomfort. One of the most sensitive is sexual pleasure, which can make teaching more engaging while also risking the integrity and professionalism of the teacher. This article discusses that challenge by analysing a field study conducted at a Danish school at the lower secondary level. Over four days, I observed a workshop on pleasure that led me to question whether it is possible to maintain a professional distance from students when teaching about sex and pleasure, as these topics tend to blur boundaries between the public, personal and private spheres of life. To unfold my reflections on the difficulties of including pleasure in sexuality education, I present two conversations I had with students about vibrators. These conversations are analysed by applying a psychoanalytic conception of sexuality.

**Keywords:** Sexuality Education; Pleasure; Participatory Observation; Psychoanalytic Theory

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### Discussing pleasure in sexuality education

Since the late 1980s, researchers in education studies, sociology, women's studies, psychology and related fields have discussed whether and how pleasure should be included in the curriculum of school-based sexuality education (Fine, 1988; Ingham, 2005; Allen, 2012; Lamb et al. 2013; Wood et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2020). Arguments in favour of including pleasure suggest that it can promote students' sexual health and safety (Zaneva et al., 2022; Philpott et al., 2006; Ford et al., 2019), strengthen their sexual agency and responsibility (Fine, 1988; Holland et al., 1992; Bay-Cheng, 2003; Hirst, 2013) and support a diverse understanding of gender and sexuality (Rasmussen, 2004; Koepsel, 2016). The increased focus on pleasure has emerged as part of a movement toward more positive and comprehensive sexuality education. This movement challenges the traditional, risk-oriented approach, which emphasises biology, reproduction and the dangers of sex, such as sexually transmitted infections and unintended pregnancies (Hirst, 2013). Critics of the traditional risk-oriented approach have pointed out that it can appear paternalistic and irrelevant to students (Whitehead, 2005), overlook information about building healthy sexual relationships (Kantor & Lindberg, 2020) and reinforce stereotypical discourses that portray men as potential predators and women as victims in sexual relations (Fine, 1988; Bay-Cheng, 2003). In contrast, including pleasure can serve as a strategy to expand the scope of sexuality education and make it more relevant to young people.

In Denmark, sexuality education is part of a cross-curricular topic called *Health, Sexuality and Family Education*, taught at both the primary and lower secondary levels. The curriculum reflects a positive and comprehensive approach to sexuality education, defining health as more than the absence of disease and drawing on a broad understanding of gender, the body and sexuality (Ministry of Children and Education, 2021, p. 20).

This approach has also been promoted by Danish writers, researchers and organisations (Øyås-Madsen, 2023; Roien et al., 2018b; Stavngaard, 2020; de la Motte Gundersen et al., 2024). However, there is still a gap in research on Danish sexuality education regarding how teachers can incorporate the theme of pleasure as part of a comprehensive approach.

With this article, I aim to contribute to the research by presenting cases from a field study conducted at a Danish school at the lower secondary level in February 2024. The teachers at the school had planned four days of sexuality education for students in Grades 8 and 9, including a workshop on pleasure (nydelse), which I observed.<sup>1</sup> I will outline two episodes from the observation that involve conversations about vibrators. The first made me wonder whether I had disappointed a boy by responding too briefly to his question, while the second left me feeling that I may have embarrassed a group of girls by sharing private information. These episodes illustrate a challenge faced by every teacher responsible for sexuality education: striking the right balance between withholding and oversharing information. If teachers hold back, they risk appearing inauthentic and unrelatable. Conversely, oversharing can lead to immediate discomfort and undermine the teacher's credibility. I will argue that it is the transgressive nature of sexuality itself that makes it difficult for the teacher to find the right balance. This is because sexuality cuts across different aspects of life.

The Danish researchers Line Anne Roien, Christian Gravgaard and Venka Simovska have explained how: “[...] sexuality education in schools navigates between, within and across two major, often conflicting, domains delineated in antiquity by Aristotle as: “Oikos” – the private, family, and household domain, and “Polis” – the public and political domain” (Roien et al, 2018a, p. 159). According to these researchers, the public domain is often understood as the governmental and political authority that determines sexuality education, whereas the private realm refers to the individual's personal decisions. Additionally, I view the private realm as encompassing information that one may prefer to keep to oneself. Thus, I argue that sexuality education also challenges the boundaries between the public and the private by encouraging young people to discuss sensitive topics they might not feel comfortable sharing in a classroom setting.

As I observed the pleasure workshop, I felt on several occasions that my own privacy and integrity were under threat. I have emphasised this by including my reactions and reflections in both the description and analysis of the cases. My point in doing so is not only to present the conditions of the empirical study and the *situated knowledge* at stake (Haraway, 1988), but also – inspired by a psychoanalytic approach – to use my reactions as a gateway to interpreting complex situations involving multiple people and both conscious and unconscious processes (Jørgensen, 2012; Zeuthen, 2018).

### **Observing with free-floating attention**

Throughout the article, I draw on psychoanalytic theory, particularly the work of philosophers such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan and Alenka Zupančič, as both a methodological approach and a theoretical framework.

[1] Throughout the article, I have used the word pleasure to translate the Danish word *nydelse* in order to align with terminology commonly used in educational research on sexuality education.

This attempt to combine research on sexuality education with insights from psychoanalytic theory is central to the research initiative that my PhD project is part of: *Pleasure and Embarrassment—Resistance to Sexuality Education* at Aarhus University. The initiative is led by Associate Professor Kirsten Hyldgaard, who has also written about the transgressive nature of sexuality (Hyldgaard, 2024).

The psychoanalytic approach is evident before, during and after the observation. For instance, I entered the field without structured observation sheets and followed my impulses, writing down whatever came to mind. I was inspired by the Freudian concept of *free-floating attention*, which has been applied to qualitative research by researchers such as Associate Professor of Psychology Katrine Egede Zeuthen (Zeuthen, 2018). Free-floating attention refers to an attitude in Freud's analytical practice aimed at suspending presuppositions and allowing unconscious processes to emerge (Freud, 1912). Using this approach, I tried to remain present with the people at the workshop without focusing too much on what might be important to register. The aim was to allow unconscious processes to unfold between me, the teacher and the students. However, the very act of taking notes could be seen as limiting the free-floating attention, though it was necessary for my analysis of the study (Freud, 1912; Zeuthen, 2018). In addition, I applied what the psychoanalyst Dr Haydée Faimberg describes as a method of *listening to the listening* (Faimberg, 1996). This form of listening involves an awareness of how one listens to oneself and others – a kind of second-order listening. Inspired by Zeuthen's application, I used this approach to expand my listening beyond the spoken word and to note how listening circulated across different layers during the observation (Zeuthen, 2018).

Both Freud and Faimberg acknowledge listening as a method for making the unconscious speak (Freud, 1912; Faimberg, 1996). But how does one listen to something that is not directly accessible to the consciousness? To address this, I have chosen to follow Lacan's claim that the unconscious manifests itself through discontinuities, gaps and ruptures in language (Lacan, 1998, pp. 25-26). Therefore, parts of my analysis focus on such disturbances and gaps. In addition, I have drawn on psychoanalytic theory to describe some of the difficulties involved in educating about pleasure. To some extent, my interpretation of the cases resembles a form of self-analysis. Nevertheless, as Lacan states, self-analysis cannot constitute a complete interpretation; rather, it serves as a suggestion that invites further interpretation by others (Lacan, 1991, pp. 170-171). In the same spirit, I hope my self-analysis can invite others to continue interpreting and discussing the cases from the pleasure workshop. Before turning to the analysis, I will elaborate on the research setup for the participatory observation.

### **The context of the observation**

As part of my PhD project, I interviewed a teacher about including pleasure in sexuality education. After the interview, the teacher contacted me again and invited me to observe a pleasure workshop at the school where he teaches. That said, I was not involved in planning any of the activities carried out by the teachers, nor was I prepared for how the workshop would unfold. The workshop was part of a four-day sexuality education programme. It began with an introductory day, followed by three separate workshops: one on body image, one on first-time experiences, and one on pleasure.

The programme took place during the first week of February, when about half of all Danish students receive school-based sexuality education as part of an annual nationwide campaign called Uge Sex (Week of Sexuality Education) (Danish Family Planning Association, 2023).

Four classes, with around 24 students in each, participated in the programme. The students were between 14 and 16 years old. Therefore, I assumed that most had not yet had their sexual debut, as the median age for this in Denmark is 16 (Frisch et al., 2019, p. 174). During the programme, the students were divided into three large, mixed-gender groups that rotated between the workshops. As I focused solely on the pleasure workshop, I had the opportunity to observe it three times. The pleasure workshop lasted approximately four hours, plus two breaks. One teacher was primarily responsible for the activities, while another provided support. The students sat in groups of 4-6 people.

Despite some day-to-day variations, the workshop generally followed this schedule: At the beginning, I introduced myself and my research to ensure that the students understood the purpose of my presence. After that, the teacher facilitated a joint discussion about the purpose of sexuality education, followed by a brief mindfulness exercise. Then, the students got up from their chairs, walked around the room, and made fist bumps. Every time they bumped fists with a peer, they shared something they found pleasurable, though it did not have to be related to sexuality. After a short break, the students engaged in an individual writing exercise, listing things they loved and enjoyed. Following this, they were given a definition of *nydelse* (pleasure) from a Danish dictionary, which described pleasure as a form of satisfaction that can be both physical and mental, arising from various sources such as an activity, an object or a person. The task was to insert words from their list into the definition. After this, the teacher presented two books: *Dark Spring* by Unica Zürn and *The Necrophiliac* by Gabrielle Wittkop. The aim was to discuss their themes – incestuous attraction and necrophilia – as examples of taboo pleasures. As the workshop progressed, the focus on pleasure gradually took a more sexual turn. The next activity was a discussion about the pleasure gap between men and women in heterosexual relationships, referring to the difference in orgasm frequency – followed by other discussions on sexual norms.

After the lunch break, the students engaged in a brainstorming exercise where they created drawings illustrating various suggestions for how a person might regain their sexual drive. This resulted in a large collection, which the students then evaluated in groups to identify the best suggestion. As the final activity, the students built small sculptures out of tin foil symbolising sexual pleasure and presented them to the whole class. I will now present two cases that occurred on the same day during the last part of the workshop, translated from Danish into English.

### **Case 1: Drawing a red penis-like figure**

This activity took place after the lunch break. The teacher handed out papers and markers, and each student had six minutes to create six different drawings that visualised a solution to the following prompt: *You have lost your sexual drive. How can you regain it?* After each minute, the students had to begin a new drawing, leaving no time to overthink. The teacher explained that the purpose of the activity was to stimulate creative thinking.



The students worked quietly on their drawings. As I glanced over the papers, I saw a television showing porn, a phone with a big red cross, people with speech bubbles, a watch and a flaccid penis surrounded by question marks. I walked past a table with four boys from Grade 8, all of whom seemed absorbed in the task. There was no talking or laughing. One of the boys waved me over to his seat. He looked me in the eye and asked: "What does a vibrator look like?" I tried to determine whether he was joking, but he appeared to be serious. He showed me his paper and said: "I've been trying to draw one, but it looks kind of ugly." I bent over his paper and saw an enormous red, penis-like figure. Unlike a real penis, it ended in a square. I tried to appear unfazed and said: "A vibrator comes in many shapes." Then I pointed to his paper and suggested: "Perhaps you could draw an electric socket and a wire. That way, you can show that it's powered by electricity and not a real penis." He nodded and quickly began to draw a socket and a wire, which he connected to the penis-like figure. I smiled and said: "That's perfect." He looked at me, then back at the paper. He started to shake his head and pulled a grimace. Perhaps he was not satisfied with the result, but instead of helping him explore other solutions, I rushed to another table to avoid further questions.

During the break, I reflected on the episode. Initially, I felt I had handled the situation well, as I had managed to answer the boy's question without going into detail about the construction and use of vibrators. But something about his grimace and headshake lingered in my mind. I felt I had, in some way, let him down (Fieldnote, 7 February 2024). In the following, I present another situation from the field study, in which I conducted myself quite differently, making an effort to be more authentic and open-minded.

## **Case 2: Modelling sex toys in tin foil**

The students sat in groups at their tables while the teacher handed out large pieces of tin foil. He instructed them to build sculptures portraying what sexual pleasure might look like. He also mentioned that each student would be expected to present their own sculpture to the rest of the class at the end of the session. As the students began folding the tin foil, a loud crackling sound filled the room.

I observed three Grade 8 girls with whom I had spoken during earlier activities. Unlike the other students, they had barely begun modelling, and I felt a strong urge to support them. "What are you guys doing?" I asked. One of the girls replied: "Sex toys" and giggled. I looked at the sculpture in her hand but could not tell what it was meant to represent. It was round, flat and bent in the middle. Puzzled by her sculpture, I asked: "What kind of sex toy is it?" The girl looked down at her sculpture and said: "I don't know." The other girls were still quiet. I felt uneasy because they seemed uncomfortable with the task, and I decided to offer a few suggestions. I said: "You could, for example, make some handcuffs or a vibrator, and vibrators come in many shapes." The girls did not respond to my suggestions and avoided eye contact. Rather than leaving them to it, I began telling an anecdote: "I once had a friend with a vibrator shaped like a little egg. This vibrator had a remote to control the level of vibrations." The girls remained quiet, so I continued: "My friend brought the vibrator with her to a music festival. She would then have the egg inside her while we, a group of girls, took turns controlling it with the remote." The girls looked at each other and laughed. I felt awkward.

To ease the situation, I looked at the small, round sculpture and said: “But this also has a funny shape. It looks very comfortable.” I walked away with a sense of discomfort, unsure whether my final comment had improved the situation or made it worse.

At the end of the session, the teacher gathered the students so they could present their sculptures. One student showed a rose and said it symbolised the connection between pleasure and love. Another student had modelled a condom and explained that sex could be more pleasurable with protection. Then, one of the girls from the group I had spoken with earlier was asked to present her sculpture. She said: “A sex toy”, without further explanation. Nobody in the room asked any questions, which I found a bit strange, as it still was not clear to me what kind of sex toy the sculpture was meant to represent (Fieldnote, 7 February 2024).

Later, I called the teacher and told him about the episode. He said that he had also noticed the same group of girls struggling with the task of sculpting pleasure. To support them, he had shown them a website featuring a collection of vibrators. According to him, the girls responded positively to his guidance and did not seem embarrassed. This made me question why they had reacted so differently in our conversations. The teacher suggested that the confidentiality of his relationship with the girls may have encouraged them to speak more openly (Fieldnote, 7 February 2024). I have included the phone call, as it offers another perspective on the situation, allowing me to compare my position with the teacher's. In the following section, I will analyse the two cases by focusing on the challenge of balancing information.

### **Crossing boundaries**

The two conversations began in very different ways, which influenced how they unfolded. The boy initiated the first conversation. I am unsure whether he approached me because of my professional role or due to my personal experience as a woman. Regardless of the reason, he seemed to assume that I was familiar with the subject, and because he had initiated the conversation, I was less concerned about crossing his boundaries. Instead, I focused on protecting my own. Hence, I redirected the conversation away from potentially transgressive topics by referring to everyday objects such as electric sockets and wires. However, it is questionable whether I succeeded in listening to him. Perhaps his question reflected a genuine curiosity to learn more about pleasure and masturbation in connection with female genitalia. What if he had tried to make me talk about different kinds of vibrators and compare clitoris orgasm with vaginal orgasm? I am not saying that all vibrators are intended for people with vulvas, but his drawing made me think that his curiosity might have been oriented in that direction. However, I can easily understand his disappointment, as I approached his question as a technical task concerning his drawing skills, rather than as an expression of curiosity. In retrospect, I perceive my response as a strategy to distance myself from both him and the topic. But to be honest, my distance was not only due to insecurity about sharing my sexual experiences; I was also afraid of revealing a lack of knowledge on the subject. I was concerned that he might expect me to act as a sex expert – someone who knew all about the chemistry behind orgasms and the facts surrounding vibrators. And although I study sexuality education, I do not hold a degree in sexology. For that reason, I was concerned about losing credibility if he asked a question I could not answer.



On the other hand, one could argue that I acted professionally by trusting my gut feeling and steering the conversation toward a less controversial topic. My actions thus illustrate a dilemma commonly faced by many researchers relying on ethnographic methods: how to remain receptive to participants without placing oneself in an overly vulnerable position (Angrosino & de Pérez, 2000, p. 679). From this perspective, one could argue that I was already being receptive by looking at the drawing, and that it was acceptable to protect my boundaries when I sensed the situation might get out of control. By creating distance and walking away, I allowed myself time to immerse in different layers of listening. I thus began to listen to both my own reactions and the boy's apparent disappointment.

### **Following a goodness script**

In the second case, the girls did not request my help, and I was the one who initiated the conversation. Had I listened more carefully, I might have noticed their reluctance when responding to my question about their sculpture. All they said was “sex toys” without further explanation. This reaction can be interpreted as an attempt to shut down the conversation, an impression reinforced by their avoidance of eye contact. Compared to the other case, the roles were reversed, as I was now in the position of potentially threatening someone's boundaries by discussing a sensitive subject, while they were perhaps trying to create distance by signalling a lack of interest. At the time, however, I did not attend to their way of listening, and so I continued telling the anecdote.

Danish researchers in education studies Jette Kofoed and Dorthe Staunæs describe a so-called ‘goodness script’ of expectations that can affect researchers in social contexts of high intensity (Kofoed & Staunæs, 2015, pp. 32-33). Such intensity may result from conflicts, a politicised environment or a clash of norms. When a researcher enters a zone of high intensity, the goodness script works as a compelling force, prompting intervention and problem-solving. Despite good intentions, the script can lead to hasty decisions or attempts to address issues that are beyond the researcher's domain. Based on this, Kofoed and Staunæs argue that it is sometimes more ethical for the researcher to refrain from intervening and instead focus on bringing new insight to the research (Kofoed & Staunæs, 2015, pp. 24-26, 32-33). If we follow this line of thought, it could be argued that I acted more ethically in the first conversation with the boy, where I did not feel the same urge to intervene but instead tried to maintain some distance.

When I walked over to the girls, I did not experience any obvious conflict. Nevertheless, I sensed their discomfort while they were modelling pleasure out of tin foil. This discomfort was likely influenced by the controversial and politicised nature of sexuality education, which tends to create tension in the classroom. Rather than remaining in the background and observing the situation, I felt a strong urge to follow the goodness script and act responsibly in a moment of high intensity. However, as mentioned, the girls were reluctant to engage in dialogue. Their silence seemed to have a peculiar impact on me, and I suddenly recalled a memory from around 15 years ago, when I was a teenage girl closer to their age. Can I attribute my outburst of private details to a process of (unconscious) identification? Or why did I treat the girls so differently? Although I do not wish to delve into a discussion about gender differences, it most likely played a role, as I felt safer around the girls and projected myself into their position. Unfortunately, this prevented me from truly listening to them.

It was only when I heard their laughter that I realised that my story had gone too far. It made me very uncomfortable, as I perceived myself from the outside – as a stranger who had disclosed something private.

### **Playing the role of the teacher**

My purpose in attending the workshop was to observe and collect material for research. However, at times, my role shifted and began to resemble that of the teacher, as I positioned myself as an adult with knowledge relevant to the students. Playing the role of the teacher was not easy, and when the conversations touched on sensitive topics, I struggled to remain professional and open-minded. Perhaps I should have refrained from entering these conversations in the first place and adopted a more passive role. Rather than continuing with methodological considerations, I find it more interesting to use my experience as an illustrative example of a pedagogical challenge in sexuality education. As mentioned, this is the challenge of balancing information, which I will relate to the discussion of the development of the teacher's professional identity.

Today, many students in the Danish welfare sector are introduced to the 3-P model, which stands for professional, personal and private (Jappe, 2010, p. 181). According to the model, a good teacher should integrate their professional competences with their personality, without allowing private needs to dictate their behaviour. Thus, the model differentiates between being personal and being private. Even so, it is questionable whether such a separation is possible when teaching sexuality education, which brings some of the most private aspects of life into the classroom. In other words, how can a teacher approach sexuality education in a way that is both professional and personal, without compromising their own privacy? Drawing on a psychoanalytic concept of sexuality, I will argue that it is the theme of sexuality itself that makes it difficult to establish clear boundaries to prevent the leakage of private information. In doing so, I will apply the works of Freud, Lacan and, in particular, Zupančič's *What is Sex?* to elaborate on the concept of sexuality and its relation to pleasure and the unconscious.

### **Psychoanalytic concept of sexuality**

According to psychoanalytic theory, sex does not serve a single purpose, such as reproduction (Zupančič, 2017, p. 10). Sexual pleasure can arise in various situations and does not necessarily involve sexual intercourse. Well-known examples are masturbation, oral sex and anal sex. But sexual pleasure also goes beyond the mere stimulation of the erogenous zones of the body (Lacan, 1998, p. 172). Suddenly, a dress, a gesture or a song can become sexual by creating tension and enjoyment. This line of thought can be traced back to Freud's concepts of perversions, partial drives and sublimation, which expand the realm of human sexuality to encompass a range of goals and activities (Freud, 2019, pp. 59, 93, 131). Freud's conception thus emphasises the messiness of sexuality, as the drives incorporate all sorts of activities and objects into the sexual. The complexity continues in the works of Lacan, who also understands sexuality as constituted by partial drives (such as the oral, anal and scopophilic drives) that pursue different aims. On their path, the drives tend to latch onto objects that evoke pleasure, for instance, food or parts of another person's body. Lacan's point is that it is not the "original aim" that produces enjoyment – but the path and the circulation itself (Lacan, 1998, pp. 178-180).

As a consequence of this psychoanalytic understanding, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to separate the sexual from the nonsexual, as the sexual infiltrates all kinds of objects and activities. Zupančič goes so far as to define sex as something that lacks a positive ontological entity. This does not mean that sex is without existence or significance. Her point is that sex exists as something inherently devoid of meaning and, therefore, cannot be confined to specific entities. Furthermore, she interprets this lack of meaning as the reason why sex often provokes embarrassment – not because it is dirty or naughty. Such labels merely obscure a much deeper issue: that we do not know what sex is (Zupančič, 2017, pp. 22-23).

I believe that a psychoanalytic understanding of sexuality can shed light on the challenge of balancing information in educational settings, where the boundaries between the sexual and the nonsexual are easily blurred. For example, in the first case, I tried to steer the conversation into a safer space by discussing everyday objects such as electric sockets and wires, which I usually perceive as quite unsexy. But this did not prevent me from feeling uncomfortable or sensing that my boundaries were at risk of being crossed. From a psychoanalytic perspective, one could say that I failed to make the conversation less sexual. On the contrary, I expanded the scope of the sexual by explaining how these objects could represent a vibrator, whose function is to stimulate pleasure. Some readers might even interpret the idea of drawing a wire and a socket as having clearly sexual undertones. To put it bluntly, I suggested that the boy sketch a string plugged into a hole. Interestingly, it was as if he sensed that these added details did not enable the drawing to capture what sexual pleasure is. Something was still missing, and he appeared unhappy with the result, even though I told him it was “perfect.”

In a similar way, the second case also illustrates the impossibility of drawing a line between the sexual and the nonsexual. I told an anecdote about an egg-shaped vibrator without thinking of it as something highly sexual. In my memory, it was more about girls having fun, fooling around and testing boundaries. Therefore, I did not consider it too private to share, as I had partially detached the story from its sexual significance. In fact, I thought the story was quite relevant to the teaching session because it described a playful and experimental use of vibrators. Judging by the girls’ reaction, I sensed that they heard it differently and may have interpreted it as some kind of arousal trip or even a big orgy. Perhaps they read more into it because they were not part of the story.

In *What is Sex?*, Zupančič describes our tendency to suspect the involvement of sex when we encounter situations that we do not fully understand. She says: “We could perhaps go so far as to say: when – in the human realm – we come across something and have absolutely no clue what it is, we can be pretty certain that it ‘has to do with sex’” (Zupančič, 2017, p. 23). According to Zupančič, this suspicion is an epistemological effect of sex lacking any complete meaning. When the sexual cannot be confined to specific practices and purposes, all sorts of things can then be understood as sexual, especially those we do not fully understand. Based on this, my anecdote might have been perceived as even more sexual because of what was left to the imagination. This adds another dimension to the challenge of balancing information, as teachers must navigate not only the level of detail they share, but also the risk that withholding information may lead to the perception that something sexual is involved.

Moreover, the last case also shows that the category of private information does not refer to specific content, as it can change depending on the interaction. What feels appropriate to share in one moment may later feel like a violation of privacy.

If we accept the psychoanalytic thesis that sex lacks a specific meaning, this may help explain why sexuality education tends to provoke feelings of ignorance and insecurity. It is hardly surprising that people feel uncertain about a subject that continues to branch out. I, for instance, feared being called out for my insufficient knowledge of the technical aspects of vibrators during the conversation with the boy. Similarly, an international meta-study on sexuality education notes that students, especially boys, may fear appearing sexually ignorant or inexperienced in front of their peers (Pound et al., 2016, p. 6). This fear can also affect teachers despite their age and experience. I will argue that the fear of appearing ignorant is not something teachers can simply overcome by studying books on orgasms, kinks, sex toys, pornography and so on. Although such knowledge may support their judgment and enhance their teaching, it nonetheless cannot eliminate the possibility that students might ask questions that expose teachers' inability to know everything about sex.

### **A confrontation with unconscious pleasure**

A further characteristic of the psychoanalytic understanding of sex is that its lack of meaning creates space for a surplus of something else, namely pleasure (Zupančič, 2017, pp. 42, 49)<sup>2</sup>. In short, whenever we are dealing with sexuality, we are confronted with both pleasure and a lack of meaning. It is this combination that distinguishes human sexuality from that of animals, as we cannot simply learn about our sexual pleasures by following our instinct. Instead, human sexuality presents itself as an enigma due to the influence of the unconscious (Zupančič, 2017, p. 10). I would like to elaborate on the relationship between sexuality and the unconscious, as it raises another challenge to teaching about sexual pleasure.

The unconscious has an ambiguous epistemic structure that is neither knowledge nor non-knowledge. Zupančič praises Slavoj Žižek for offering one of the best definitions of the unconscious, describing it as: “[...] things we do not know that we know [...]” (Žižek, 2008, p. 457). This dual status arises from our engagement with a repressed type of knowledge – something we do not want to know (Zupančič, 2017, p. 16). Zupančič explains that the child's early experience of sexuality is also an encounter with the unconscious, which occurs when the child senses that the parents share something they do not want to address (Zupančič, 2017, pp. 10-11). In this situation, the unconscious appears as a hidden message that the child cannot decode but still understands as something significant. However, we miss the point if we assume that the child will eventually understand the message upon reaching puberty. The enigmatic status of sexuality also applies to adults, since the development of the genitals does not provide a clear idea of what sex is. For adults, unconscious knowledge continues to sexualise things by adding hidden messages. Conversely, if we imagine a random practice typically categorised as sex, but stripped of all mystery and surprise, it can suddenly appear quite unsexy. This is because it is our very relation to the unconscious that makes some pleasures sexual and others not (Zupančič, 2017, pp. 10-11, 141-142).

[2] Both Lacan and Zupančič use words other than pleasure, such as enjoyment and satisfaction, to describe reactions to sexual stimulation and excitement. Still, I have chosen to continue using the word pleasure for the sake of consistency and to minimise confusion – though it is debatable whether pleasure can be equated with the other concepts.

Thus, we do not have any positive criteria to determine what belongs to the category of the sexual – only enigmatic messages from the unconscious. This further explains why the boundaries between the sexual and the nonsexual are so easily crossed. Put differently, it is the unconscious involvement in our sexuality that makes it inherently transgressive.

When interpreting the conversations, several moments stand out as possibly influenced by the unconscious. As mentioned earlier, one way to approach this is to look for discontinuities, ruptures or gaps. Personally, I remain most struck by the girls' unwillingness to answer what kind of sex toy they were modelling. I interpret their silence as a gap – an indication that unconscious processes may have interfered with the conversation. One of the girls even claimed that she did not know what they were doing. Yet, together with the others, she managed to shape something round and bent, which they later presented to the rest of the class.<sup>3</sup> So, did she genuinely not know, or was she simply unwilling to tell me? It could also be that the girl was, in fact, the one most attuned to the unconscious dimension of sexuality. She might have sensed a repressed knowledge that had to remain unspoken, and, in that way, she signalled not-knowing as a form of knowledge (Zupančič, 2017, p. 16). Perhaps the rest of the class sensed the same thing when they refrained from asking questions about the shape of the sculpture.


I find this situation to be a good example of how teachers in sexuality education are not only dealing with a lack of knowledge. They are also confronted with an unconscious form of knowledge – something the students do not want to know, something they do not realise they already know. Of course, some aspects of sexuality education are more easily approached as information to be passed on – for instance, education on contraception methods or legislation on sexual assault. Even so, it becomes difficult to stay on that path when teaching involves pleasure. With this subject, teachers face something that is impossible to delineate due to its relation to the unconscious – an element that also generates resistance when spoken about. Such resistance is the focal point in Hyldgaard's research on sexuality education, and it can manifest in many ways (Hyldgaard, 2024). For instance, teachers may withhold information, begin to laugh, stutter or change the subject. The resistance may also be expressed by students, who might disrupt the teaching, look at their phones or simply refrain from participating in the conversation, as was the case with the girls. Following Zupančič, such reactions are not only a result of the sensitive nature of the subject, which can cause embarrassment and insecurity, but also a result of the subject lacking a specific meaning. This means that the resistance is directed at repressed knowledge, which prevents us from understanding the sexual. From a psychoanalytic perspective, one could say that how the girls' roundish sculpture presented itself to me is perhaps a good illustration of what sexual pleasure is: something that appears pleasurable without a reason that explains why.

### **Accepting the possibility of embarrassment and discomfort**

I will argue that it can be helpful for teachers to be introduced to the psychoanalytic understanding of sexuality before entering the field of sexuality education.

[3] After conducting the observation study, a fellow researcher in sexuality education pointed out a resemblance between the sculpture and a type of vibrator with a curved and organic shape. At the time, I was unfamiliar with this type of vibrator and, therefore, puzzled by the sculpture. However, I cannot say whether the girls intended to create such a vibrator, as they did not tell me. All they said was "sex toys," without mentioning what kind of sex toy it represented.





By learning about the blurred boundaries between the sexual and the nonsexual, the potential disclosure of privacy, the fear of appearing ignorant, and the relationship between sexuality and the unconscious, teachers may be better equipped to navigate difficult situations. This is because the psychoanalytic perspective allows the teacher to approach these issues as constituted by the nature of sexuality. In other words, it is the fact that sexuality does not contain a positive ontological entity that makes it appear in all types of situations and cross boundaries between private and public. What remains is the mess that sex tends to drag along and an unconscious form of knowledge that provokes various forms of resistance. By acknowledging these fundamental problems with sex, it may become easier for teachers not to regard it as a personal failure every time a conversation takes an uncomfortable turn. In fact, this can happen to anyone, as teachers cannot predict how students will respond to the teaching – or how they themselves will feel about teaching such an inherently transgressive subject.

Someone might think that my description of the workshop and the difficulties of addressing the subject of sexual pleasure do not exactly encourage teachers to include it in the curriculum. Therefore, I find it necessary to explain why I still believe it is a good idea to teach about pleasure. Inspired by Megan Boler, a professor in social justice education, I argue that teachers' discomfort cannot, on its own, justify avoiding the inclusion of sensitive and controversial subjects in the curriculum (Boler, 1999: pp. 194-195). By avoiding a topic such as pleasure, we miss out on the positive impact it can have on students' sexual well-being in multiple ways: Firstly, an international research review highlights a correlation between education on sexual pleasure and an increased use of condoms among young people, which positively affects their sexual health by reducing the risk of unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections (Zaneva et al., 2022). Secondly, focusing on pleasure can make the teaching more engaging for students, as research shows that young people demand comprehensive sex education that does not focus solely on the dangers of having sex (Forrest et al., 2004; Allen, 2008; Pound, 2016; Wind et al., 2023). Thirdly, teaching about pleasure can support students' sexual agency, especially that of young women (Fine, 1988; Holland et al., 1992; Hirst, 2013). A fourth argument in favour highlights the subject's potential to broaden perspectives on the diversity of gender and sexuality (Rasmussen, 2004).

I believe these advantages should motivate teachers to face the challenge of balancing information, despite the possibility of contributing to an awkward atmosphere. At the pleasure workshop, some of the activities did create tensions in the classroom, and it is open to discussion whether all of them were appropriate for this particular group of students – for example, modelling pleasure in tin foil. Still, I found the teaching setup inspiring, as it allowed the students to explore the concept of pleasure from different angles. The workshop thus created space for multiple interpretations of what pleasure could look like, rather than reinforcing a traditional perspective on pleasure, which often focuses solely on reproduction and male ejaculation. Researchers such as Professor Michelle Fine explain that this kind of teaching tends to overlook the pleasure of women (and other genders), as only male orgasm is considered necessary within a reproductive framework (Fine, 1988, pp. 36-37). From this perspective, the pleasure workshop did succeed in making a Grade 8 boy think about vibrators and how pleasure appears outside genital penetration.



I will argue that the workshop's ability to broaden the boy's perspective on sex and pleasure should outweigh the disappointment he may have felt from not having all his questions answered. In fact, I understand the student's disappointment as a condition that is likely to arise in all forms of sexuality education, as it concerns a subject that always leaves room for further discussion.


### **Speaking in the third person**

This article has now outlined several aspects of the challenge of balancing information and protecting people's boundaries in sexuality education. Yet the introduction of the unconscious raises the question of whether it even makes sense to talk about the challenge of balancing information. Should we instead call it an impossibility, since we are dealing with an unconscious form of knowledge that is, in some way, beyond our control? Even so, I have chosen to stick with the word challenge, as it still makes sense to distinguish between better and worse approaches to teaching about pleasure.

During my phone call with the teacher, I realised that he may have taken a better approach to the girls than I did. According to his interpretation, this was due to his relationship with the girls, which made it feel safer for them to talk about private and sensitive topics. But I also think he was better at balancing information. Rather than sharing something from his personal experiences, he showed them the website of one of the major Danish brands in the pleasure industry. This gave the girls an opportunity to read about and explore different vibrators and other sex toys on their own. His approach aligns well with the recommendations of the Danish Family Planning Association, which advises teachers to speak in the third person and avoid sharing personal experiences when teaching sex education (Danish Family Planning Association, 2024). According to the organisation, 'anonymising' the teaching can help create a safer space, where both children and teachers feel less pressure to reveal private details. While this may serve as a good rule of thumb in most situations, I do not believe it fully resolves the challenge. Even when speaking in the third person and using hypothetical scenarios, a conversation may still feel intrusive and cause embarrassment. My point is this: if you demonstrate knowledge about threesomes, strap-ons, rimming, vibrators and similar topics, students might interpret it as a hint about your own sexual activities and preferences, even if you do not use words like "I" or "mine". Secondly, during my observational study, I noticed situations where students reacted positively when the teacher shared personal sexual experiences. This occurred, for instance, during the evaluation of the entire sexuality education programme, where several students highlighted another workshop in which a teacher shared her story about the first time she had sex. One of the students explained that it was nice to hear a true story from someone they knew (Fieldnote, 8 February 2024). In this way, talking about personal sexual experiences does not necessarily result in embarrassment or create an unsafe environment, as it can also enhance student engagement. With this point, I want to emphasise how much individual teacher-student relationships can determine whether a classroom feels safe, which makes it difficult to judge what is appropriate for a teacher to share.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have discussed the challenges of teaching about pleasure as part of sexuality education, focusing on examples from a field study.



Both cases centred on vibrators, but the conversations affected me in different ways. In the first case, I felt that I had disappointed someone by saying too little, whereas in the second case, I was embarrassed by how much private information I had overshared. After the observation, my immediate inclination was to delete both conversations from my field notes out of frustration at not having managed to remain open-minded and professional at the same time. But instead of deleting the conversations, I found them relevant for illuminating a pedagogical challenge faced by teachers responsible for sexuality education. I have referred to this as the challenge of balancing information. By using psychoanalytic theory, I have shown how this challenge occurs, especially when teaching about pleasure, which is connected to the unconscious dimension of sexuality. This connection makes it difficult to fully separate sexual pleasure from nonsexual pleasure, thereby making the sexual, in some sense, impossible to delineate. As a result, students might feel disappointed when teachers try to address pleasure, as they sense that there is more to the subject than what has been laid out. I argue that neither the possibility of disappointment nor discomfort should prevent teachers from initiating discussions and activities on sensitive and controversial aspects of sexuality, such as the theme of pleasure. Instead, teachers should recognise these feelings not as a reflection of their competence, but as something inherent to the subject matter itself.

#### **Abstract: Dansk**

Skolernes seksualundervisning har potentiale til at blive mere engagerende og relevant for eleverne ved at inddrage undervisning om seksuel nydelse. Dog kan emnet være udfordrende for lærerens integritet og professionalisme. Artiklen diskuterer denne problematik i forbindelse med et feltstudie på en dansk skole, hvor jeg over fire dage observerede en nydelses-workshop arrangeret af skolens lærere. Under workshoppen havde jeg svært ved at være åben over for eleverne og samtidig bevare en professionel distance. Det fik mig til at sætte spørgsmålstejn ved, om det er muligt at opretholde en sådan distance i undervisningen om sex og nydelse, der ofte krydser grænserne mellem offentlige, personlige og private sfærer. Artiklen tager udgangspunkt i to samtaler med elever fra 8. klasse, der begge handler om vibratoren. Disse samtaler vil blive analyseret med inddragelse af psykoanalytisk teori for at uddybe de udfordringer, der er forbundet med at undervise om nydelse.

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