The State of Sex Education in Hungary – Part 1

What should young people know about sex? And who wants to tell them what?

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On 15 June 2021**,** the Hungarian Parliament adopted *Act LXXIX of 2021 on tougher action against paedophile offenders and amending certain laws to protect children*, more commonly known as the *Child Protection Act*. This has caused great controversy both in Hungary and internationally. The law has been given many names, including the paedophilia law and the homophobic law. People's attitudes towards the law largely depend on their worldview or political convictions and how they want to interpret the law and communicate about it.

The law bans external NGOs from providing sex education in Hungarian public schools, and those that were previously allowed have been suspended. Writing about this law, Prime Minister Viktor Orbán stated the following in his article entitled *Szamizdat 10*[4]:

"*The new Hungarian law clearly states that parents shall decide on the sex education that their children receive. School education must not be in conflict with the will of the parents. It can be no more than a complementary education, and its form and content must be clearly defined and subject to the parents' consent*." Following the publication of the law, it has been repeatedly stated that the legislation will be clarified to state what can and cannot be brought into a school as sex education. However, the registration platform for this has not yet been made available, so teachers (and parents) are forced to work from what they are legally allowed to do.

Who should deal with this?

Several international studies[5] have shown that parents are the primary source of information about sexuality for their children, or at least would be if they were willing or able to take on this role. Children want to hear about sexuality primarily from their parents. Today, the average age at which children are exposed to pornography is 11 years.[6] It is extremely important for parents to prepare their children for exposure to pornography by then. Children mainly consume pornography on their smartphones, tablets and laptops, but those who do not have such devices watch it on their peers' mobile phones. Children who have not seen pornographic content by the age of 11 are now the lucky exception. Parents who have an idea of what pornography was 15-20 years ago should assume that their child will be exposed to some form of pornography

[4] Orbán V., 2021. The liberal steamrollers are at it again against Hungary. Szamizdat 10.

[5] T. Turnbull, A. van Wersch, P. van Schaik, 2008, A review of parental involvement in sexual education

[6] Cs. M. Dulácska, 2020, Teenstar módszertan meghonosítása Magyarországon, Pg. 36

by the age of 11. The School Education Gateway[7] (SEG) website conducted a survey in 2019 among teachers, other education professionals and parents on sex education.[8] The survey found, among other things, that *"[m]ore than three quarters (81%) of respondents thought that parents or guardians were primarily responsible for the sex education of young people.* The *majority also found school counsellors (74%), local health care providers (72%) and school teachers and educators (68%) suitable for this task."* (Interestingly, respondents found both NGOs (9%) and representatives of the local religious community (10%) significantly less suitable for this task.)

The survey reveals that 53% of respondents think that no one in their region provides support for teachers on sex education, with 33% saying that the Ministry of Education provides guidance and resources to help teachers. (When interpreting this data, it is important to note that only 41% of the respondents were teachers.) However, there was broad agreement (99%) that schools should provide sex education to young people, with the only difference of opinion being from what age: 42% say it should be started before the age of 12, while 47% say it is needed between the ages of 12 and 15.

Although the SEG survey is not representative, it is likely to be a reliable indicator of trends and the distribution of opinions.

Is the situation really disastrous?

Vilmos Szilágyi, a well-known sex psychologist who wrote a book entitled "*Nyitott házasság – korszerűbb életstílus"* (*Open Marriage - A More Modern Lifestyle)*, gave a brief summary on the history of sex education in Hungary after the Second World War.[9] He notes that the communist dictatorship treated the issue as taboo until 1969. From the 1970s onwards, various books and booklets on sex education were published, but they never became part of the official school curriculum, and the author states that the reason for this was resistance on the part of the political leadership. The popularity of "*Doctor's Answers*" or "*Psychologist's Answers*" columns in newspapers and magazines is an indication of the public interest in the subject, but despite this, and despite the increasing number of textbooks, sex education has not been institutionalised. "*Apart from a few narrow and short-lived individual initiatives, sex education in Hungarian schools (and other institutions) has always been absent [N.B.: 2003]. Occasionally, a doctor or other healthcare professional is invited to give an informative lecture to the students. However, this is clearly not enough and cannot compensate for the negative influences that young people are exposed to on a daily basis, for example in commercial TV series such as Big Brother or Real World, not to mention the flood of pornographic magazines and films.*"[10] A few paragraphs later in the study this statement is contradicted, as it states that sex education has already been mentioned in the new NAT (National Curriculum), although the author criticises the extent and orientation of this education. "*Under the new rules that came*

[7] The School Education Gateway (SEG) project is an initiative of the European Union, funded through the Erasmus+ framework, the European Union's education, training, youth and sport programme. The project is supervised by the European Commission and managed by the European Agency for Education and Culture (EACEA).

[8] Survey on sex education, schooleducationgateway.eu, 27 December 2019

[9] V. Szilágyi, 2003, A szexuális nevelés nálunk és másutt, Új Pedagógiai Szemle 2003/11

[10] Ibid.

*into force a few years ago, the **National Curriculum** and its more recent versions require primary schools to teach healthy lifestyles, including sexuality-related anatomy and biology matters, but direct information about sexuality (or sex education) plays a minor role. Educators are still unprepared. They do not have the time to deal with such matters, and no relevant textbooks or reference books are available.*

The previous [N.B.: Fidesz-KDNP] government tried to propagate a conservative, repressive-type sex education, for example in the video film series commissioned by the Ministry of Education for presentation and discussion in secondary schools. These materials recommended premarital virginity and sexual abstinence." We will come back later to what Vilmos Szilágyi offers as an alternative. But first, let's take a look at the widely held belief, thanks to his extensive work, that the current state of sex education in the Hungarian school system is a disaster. Psychologist Gábor Semsey started from this premise when he wrote his PhD dissertation entitled "*The practice of sex education in grammar schools in Hungary"*.[11] The results he obtained, however, forced him to revise his initial hypotheses: *"Overall, the situation in secondary education is slightly better than we had expected based on the dissatisfaction of Hungarian professionals*:

- *There are educators who are committed to sex education in schools and are looking for the best ways to do it.*
- *In many places, there is an awareness that sex education is a comprehensive task for the whole school, and that it is worth involving more teachers and other professionals as well.*
- *Some of the educators involved have recognised not only that students need more than just basic sex education (i.e. biology and health knowledge), but that sex education also requires a much more complex approach. And, in many cases, this is what they are trying to achieve.*
- *Many schools also provide sex education as part of extra-curricular activities (e.g. camps, class weekends, spiritual practice or pastoral care, school days and dormitory afternoons).*
- *In many places, NGOs are being involved to help with sex education*."[12]

Of course, the author does not hide the shortcomings, and one of the biggest problems he sees is that sex education teachers do not consult with children, parents or even each other, and there are no curricula "*in schools, teachers are left to themselves, and the quality of sex education depends solely on the diligence, dedication and experience of individual teachers*."[13]

Regulated by law

The issue of sex education is reflected in the documents governing public education in Hungary, both in terms of legislation and regulations. Act CXC on National Public Education was published in 2011 and has been amended several times since then. There is no explicit reference in the law to sex education in institutions. At the same time, the teacher's duties include "*to ensure the development of the child's personality in the course of his or her teaching and learning"* and *"to make every possible effort to develop and protect the child's physical and mental health: through education, [...] involving the parent and – if necessary – other*

[11] G. Semsey, 2016, A szexuális nevelés gyakorlata a magyarországi gimnáziumokban.

[12] Ibid. 6-7.

[13] Ibid. 7.

professionals". (Act CXC of 2011, Section 62(1)(g)). As we have already mentioned, although it is not explicitly noted, sex education can certainly be understood as a learning process closely related to personality development, as Kata Makrai writes in her article analysing the Hungarian legislation on sex education.[14]

The EMMI [Ministry of Education] regulations on public education and their amendments, however, already provide quite specifically for the identity of the persons who are to provide sex education. Initially, this was the responsibility of kindergarten and school psychologists.[15] The EMMI Decree № 8/2013 extends the scope of persons who can provide sex education. In addition to kindergarten and school psychologists, the regulation considers biology teachers and "*therapeutic physical education and health promotion teachers as suitable for delivering thematic parent meetings on the topic of sex education, and knowledge related to sexual behaviour should be included in their professional methodology. […] It can be said that in our country the legal framework provides the personnel conditions set out in the Directive. Every primary school must have a professional trained in the field of sex education, as the employment of both school psychologists and biology teachers is a legal requirement*."[16]

Makrai also analyses the content of the regulations, namely their compliance with the European principles on sex education, as formulated in 2010 by the WHO Regional Office for Europe and the German Federal Centre for Health Education. The aim of these Directives is "*to establish standards for this field of education throughout the European Union and to promote the introduction of a holistic approach to sex education in the Union, as opposed to traditional sex education which focuses on the dangers of sexuality*."[17]

In his summary, the author finds that the picture is diverse. "*In some areas, we are closely in line with international trends, while in others we are lagging significantly behind, and there are areas where we have both a progressive and a strongly conservative approach*." In light of the WHO Guidelines and all that is going on in sex education in public institutions in Hungary today, according to the author there is a lack of gender education, an inadequate presentation of gender diversity in society, not enough attention being paid to sexual minorities, and the fact that the words "girl" and "boy" are among the key concepts in the section on gender identity is a problem.[18]

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[14] K. Makrai, 2018, *Iskolai szexuális nevelés Magyarországon* in Tanítani online

[15] EMMI Regulation № 20/2012 on the operation of educational institutions and the naming of public educational institutions

[16] K. Makrai, 2018

[17] Ibid.

[18] "*Although it is not stated that the regulator only distinguishes between two genders, the fact that it starts from secondary gender characteristics and focuses on the search for differences calls into question whether it meets the expectation of the Guidelines that sex education should seek to accept the differences that result from the diversity of gender in society, and whether it takes into account the differences between gender and biological sex in the question of "gender". […] Within the subject of moral philosophy, an examination of the primary school curriculum shows that [...] the thematic unit "My World" deals with the issue of identity, with the key concepts of "girl" and "boy". In other words, the statements made in relation to the National Curriculum become clear here. In other words the possibility of social gender diversity is not part of the content regulation (EMMI Decree № 22/2016, Annex 1). […] Even in its introductory lines the National Curriculum encourages the acceptance of various identities and differences. However, if we look at the thematic units, we see that only religious and cultural diversity is discussed in more detail. Other minorities - such as sexual minorities - are not covered in any part of the curriculum."*

In Hungary, there have already been government efforts to increase the social acceptance of the above approaches considered as neglected. This includes a government decree published in 2009[19], which defines as an important aspect of pre-school education "*to consciously avoid reinforcing gender stereotypes and help to break down prejudices about gender equality in society."* Here can also be included the series of gender mainstreaming training courses at government level,[20] organised in the first half of 2009 at the initiative of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, Secretariat of State for Equal Chances, and implemented under the European Commission's Progress Programme.

Excerpts from "*From the Sidelines to the Mainstream - Gender Mainstreaming"* handbook: "*Gender mainstreaming is the review, reorganisation, development and evaluation of public policies by responsible current decision-makers*."[21] Furthermore: "*Gender mainstreaming is a comprehensive and inclusive strategy for a more just and equal society*. *But [...] if the top leadership of the organisation (ministry, agency or authority) that is introducing gender mainstreaming does not fully support the idea and does not get behind the issue, there is no chance that the reform can take off in practice and be supported by all subunits*."[22] In other words, this was a top-down type of sensitisation or social consciousness forming.

Education for Family Life

As you may have noticed from what has been written so far – and as presumably you were already aware – sex education of young people is a battleground of ideological concepts. In essence, everyone, by which we mean the government, teachers, education professionals, parents and NGOs, agrees that schools have a responsibility to educate students about sex. However, what is included in this education and what is not is a matter of differing opinions, depending on the ideology of specific opinion leaders. In line with the 2012 National Curriculum, Education for Family Life (EFL) was published for the first time as an optional item on the curriculum.[23] This is not just about sex education, although it is the most explicit of all the documents on public education and expresses the need to educate young people in this area, based on the following principles:

"5. Gender – male/female identity – sexuality – relationships

The aim is to help students from early school age onwards to develop a gender identity according to their genetic sex, to learn about the basic differences between the sexes (gender character, brain function, communication, etc.), to dismantle harmful stereotypes about gender roles of male/father – female/mother, to experience the biological, psychological and

[19] Government Decree № 255/2009 (XI. 20.) amending Government Decree № 137/1996 (VIII. 28.) on the publication of the national basic programme of kindergarten education.

[20] The training series and the accompanying manual were originally published on the www.nfu.hu/gender_mainstreaming website, which has since been removed, but the handbook entitled *Partszélről a fősodorba – Gender mainstreaming* (*From the Sidelines to the Mainstream - Gender Mainstreaming*) is still available in several places, e.g.: http://konszenzus.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Gender_mainstreaming_kezikonyv.pdf

[21] Betlen A., Krizsán A. Zentai V. 2009, Partszélről a fősodorba, 49.

[22] Betlen A., Krizsán A. Zentai V. 2009, 55.

[23] https://kerettanterv.oh.gov.hu/07_melleklet_miniszter/k1_07_egyeb/index_csen.html

behavioural changes during adolescence in a positive way, and to develop a fertility-conscious attitude, where the child is seen as a gift. It intends to assist you in finding and choosing the right partner. It is important to familiarise students with the different types of male-female relationships and the happiness and disappointments they can experience, and to develop a family-friendly attitude. Another aim is to make sure that the young are adequately prepared for a mature, responsible, balanced and healthy sexual life based on a harmonious, happy and committed relationship (marriage). They can also learn the skills they need for a healthy sex life. In learning about the beauty of human conception and foetal development, let the young understand that human life has value from conception to natural death."[24]

Schools that choose EFL from the optional curricula receive a detailed curriculum, lesson plans and instructional videos for grades 1-12, according to the maturity and interest level of the children, with nine double lessons per grade. Teachers can become EFL instructors through a 60-hour accredited training course. The Cycle Show[25] and Secret Mission ("Titkos Küldetés" in Hungarian)[26] are programmes linked to EFL, and place particular emphasis on developing bodily awareness and fertility awareness within sex education. As we mentioned at the beginning of this study, the Child Protection Act that came into force last September currently stipulates that no one outside of school, including EFL teachers, can teach a lesson on sexuality before their methodology has gone through the registration process, but – as we have also mentioned – this online registration platform is not yet available.

However, Education for Family Life is not the only possible approach to sex education for school children. As this essay has shown, there is a radically different approach, which will be dealt with in our next article.

[24] Családi Életre Nevelés, EMMI Regulation № 51/2012 (XII. 21.), Annex 7.10 (document available here: Grades 1–4)

[25] https://www.mfm-projekt.hu/

[26] https://titkoskuldetes.com/hu_HU/