

Conceptualising and representing sex and gender diversity in sex education material in the context of disability: The TRASE Word Bank

According to the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), people with disabilities are entitled to respect for privacy (Art. 22), home and family (Art. 23) and education (Art. 24), including sex education. Considering the ideological and structural impediments to sexuality and reproduction (cf. Löfren-Martenson, 2014; Desjardins, 2012) and the high risk of experiencing sexual violence people with intellectual disabilities face, appropriate sex education takes on a pivotal role in safeguarding a self-determined sexuality and the right to reproduction.

From Sept. 2015 to Aug. 2017, the University of Luxembourg was involved in the transnational and interdisciplinary ERASMUS Plus project “Training in Sex Education for People with Disabilities” (TRASE). The objective of this follow-up project to the Grundtvig-funded SEAD project was to design a course sensitive to cultural, national and institutional conditions to train professional carers of people with Intellectual disability intellectual developmental disorder (DSM-5; ICD-11) to talk about sexuality and to acknowledge the sexual and reproductive rights of their clients. The 13-module-course includes revisions and the development of new tools that are altogether accessible to a broad range of people with learning, intellectual, cognitive and communication difficulties and devised to facilitate communication on issues regarding sexuality.

One of the major questions for revising existing or devising new tools, respectively, was how to conceptualise and represent human diversity featuring in contemporary Western societies, hence avoiding that people with intellectual disabilities, who cannot or do not want to follow conservative sexual and gender norms are rendered ever more vulnerable. The TRASE Word Bank draws upon social constructionist and deconstructionist theories of gender and sexuality (e.g. Garfinkel, 1967; Weeks, 1989; Butler, 1990; 1997; Hirschauer, 1994; 1999; Cromwell, 1999; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Schirmer, 2010) and critical race and intersectional theories (e.g. Crenshaw, 1989). Methodologically, it severs gender from morphology and bases gender on self-definition instead, whilst continuing to acknowledge socially common genders; presents a variety of body parts in a non-polarising way in its pictograms; uses gender-neutral terminology to describe sexualised body parts; addresses a host of sexual arrangements; devotes equal attention to reproduction and contraception, hence avoiding the widespread notion that people with disabilities cannot or should not reproduce (cf. Siebers, 2012) and presents humans in a non-racialised way.

As a result, the TRASE Word Bank attempts to enable people with intellectual and learning disabilities with basic reading competency or who can read with assistance to understand that human sexualities, bodies and genders are diverse, to become aware of sexual options that best suit their individual personalities, to learn to accept themselves as unconventional men, women or trans, non-binary or intersex people, to reinforce their right to decide responsibly on issues relating to reproduction and to learn to respect human diversity.

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