



# Sex Education

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# Medically assisted reproduction in the biology classroom: reproducing norms under selective pronatalism

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines how selective pronatalist politics shape school-based sexuality education in Hungary through the teaching of medically assisted reproduction (MAR). Drawing on 25 qualitative interviews with secondary school biology teachers, the study explores how MAR is taught, which forms of reproductive knowledge are rendered visible or invisible, and how teachers navigate institutional, ethical and political constraints surrounding the topic. The findings show that MAR is treated as a morally sensitive yet pedagogically marginal topic, typically framed within a heteronormative and couple-centred model of legitimate reproduction. Although MAR appears formally in the curriculum, its coverage is often superficial and shaped by exam-oriented teaching, limited instructional time, and lack of teacher education and training. Teachers frequently avoid broader social and ethical discussions related to MAR, while alternative reproductive pathways and non-heteronormative family forms remain largely silenced within classroom contexts. The article argues that Hungarian secondary education functions as a site of reproductive governance, where selective pronatalist norms are reproduced through moral framing and the selective regulation of reproductive knowledge. By focussing on teachers as key mediators, the study extends reproductive governance theory by demonstrating how schools function as sites of normative reproduction through omission and silence rather than explicit exclusion.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Heteronormativity; Hungary; reproductive knowledge and governance, repronormativity, sexuality education; silences

## Introduction

Reproduction has become a central issue in Hungarian political, moral and educational debates. Within a selective pronatalist framework, the Hungarian state heavily supports childbirth among socially preferred groups while marginalising alternative reproductive pathways (Szikra 2019; Takács 2018). Medically assisted reproduction (MAR) occupies an ambivalent position: generously state-funded and widely supported at the level of public opinion, yet normatively constrained, with public discourse privileging heterosexual, couple-based parenthood (Szalma 2021; Szalma and Pélyi 2025).

Schools translate these reproductive norms into everyday knowledge, communicating not just biological facts but normative assumptions about family, gender, morality and

legitimate life courses. Sexuality education research shows curricula tend to prioritise biological and preventive framings over social, ethical and relational dimensions (Allen 2007; Walker et al. 2021), with biology education often appearing neutral despite shaping normative understandings of reproduction (Bittner and Meisert 2021).

Drawing on qualitative interviews with secondary school biology teachers, this article examines how MAR is taught in Hungarian schools, asking how teachers navigate the teaching of MAR within a selective pronatalist context and through what mechanisms classroom practices reproduce or contest *repronormative* boundaries – in the form of dominant assumptions defining reproduction as biologically based, heterosexual, and couple-centred (Weissman 2017).

The Hungarian case is especially relevant: legislation allows MAR access for single women, but explicitly excludes lesbian couples, and recent policy has further centralised control over sexuality education by excluding non-governmental organisations (NGOs) from contributing to such work in schools (Szalma and Alexandra 2024). Examining how teachers navigate this tension reveals how reproductive governance operates through everyday pedagogical practice, not just law and policy.

The article positions teachers as key mediators at the intersection of curriculum, institutional constraints, and gendered moral evaluation. Treating silences and omissions as meaningful rather than accidental, it extends reproductive governance theory (Morgan and Elizabeth 2012) to the field of education and contributes to scholarship on sexuality education, repronormativity, and reproductive knowledge politics.

## **Sexuality education under selective pronatalism in Hungary**

Sexuality education supports young people's physical, emotional and social development and promotes responsible sexual behaviour and well-being (World Health Organization WHO 2010). It is now an established part of school curricula across Europe, although content and implementation vary widely between countries (Ketting, Brockschmidt, and Ivanova 2021). Most national systems cover human reproduction, contraception, and STI prevention, but sexuality education remains predominantly biological and risk-focussed, while relational and social dimensions – gender norms, consent, and sexual diversity – are addressed far less consistently (EC [European Commission] 2020).

### ***Historical development of sexuality education in Hungary***

Sexuality education in Central and Eastern Europe has followed a distinct historical trajectory, rather than simply lagging behind Western Europe. Earlier policy documents portrayed the region as a late adopter (WHO 2010), but recent scholarship challenges this as a simplified West–East dichotomy (Lišková, Jarska, and Szegedi 2020; Jarkovská 2020). From the early 1970s, school-based family life education became central to state demographic and reproductive policy during the late socialist period (Varsa 2018; Lišková, Jarska, and Szegedi 2020). Hungary's 1973 population policy called for organised family-planning education 'from a medical perspective', and in 1974 the government officially introduced a mandatory curriculum, *Családi életre nevelés* (Preparation for Family Life), incorporating sexuality education (Takács 2015, 165). Content combined biological knowledge with discussions of marriage, parenthood, and relationships, consistently

privileging heterosexual family formation as the normative life goals. Comparative research shows there was no single state-socialist model: although Hungary, Poland and Czechoslovakia introduced systematic family life education around the same time, national programmes differed considerably in their treatment of sexuality, gender and family life (Lišková, Jarska, and Szegedi 2020). After the political transition of 1989–1990, sexuality and family-life education remained part of the curriculum, but its provision continued to be limited and uneven. A lack of trained staff and insufficient institutional preparedness remained persistent problems (Parker, Wellings, and Lazarus 2009).

### ***The institutional organisation of sexuality education in Hungary***

Contemporary sexuality education in Hungary is not a standalone subject but is embedded in biology, ethics and health education (Marek and Simon 2011). The current *Nemzeti alaptanterv* (National Core Curriculum), introduced in 2012 and substantially revised in 2020, sets the overall framework, with framework curricula and graduation requirements specifying detailed objectives. Of the 170 total biology teaching hours across four years, only seven are allocated to ‘Biological basis of human sexes and reproduction’, covering reproductive anatomy, hormonal regulation, family planning, contraception, pregnancy, childbirth, abortion, STIs, and responsible sexual behaviour (OH 2020).

Following curriculum reform in 2020, compulsory biology teaching in grammar schools was reduced, while in many vocational programmes biology appears only within an integrated science subject or in the first year. Opportunities to address topics such as MAR therefore vary substantially by institution type. The current *Biológia 9–10. évfolyam* (Biology, Grades 9–10) framework curriculum reflects a predominantly biomedical approach, with limited attention paid to social, relational and identity dimensions; neither the National Core Curriculum nor the Biology, Grades 9–10 framework curriculum include explicit learning objectives on infertility, MAR, in vitro fertilisation (IVF), gamete donation, or the ethical implications of assisted reproduction (OH 2020).

Although the curricular framework for sexuality education is centrally regulated, classroom implementation remains fragmented and teacher-dependent. Teachers retain some autonomy over depth and framing, constrained by examination requirements, limited time and available materials. This has produced considerable variation even within the same framework. Rather than passively transmitting state-defined knowledge, teachers interpret curricular expectations while responding to institutional, pedagogical and moral considerations. Whether students encounter MAR and its ethical dimensions thus depends largely on teachers’ professional judgement, confidence and available time – an institutional context that helps explain MAR’s frequent marginalisation in classroom practice, explored in the empirical analysis below.

### ***Selective pronatalism and the political regulation of sexuality education***

The institutional organisation and delivery of sexuality education should be distinguished from the broader political environment, characterised by a selective pronatalist approach spanning abortion, contraception, MAR and sexuality education policy (Szalma and Alexandra 2024). Since 2010, the government has retained legal

abortion access while introducing measures reinforcing foetal protection and women's reproductive responsibilities; contraception access remains uneven, whereas MAR has gained state support despite being restricted to selected groups. Together these policies promote childbirth while privileging heterosexual family formation and traditional gender roles, reflected in the sexuality-education content of the biology curriculum, which is centred on biological reproduction and family life, with limited attention given to reproductive rights, technologies or diverse pathways.

Curricular reforms under the Fidesz–KDNP governments have reinforced this biologically oriented, heteronormative character: the 2012 National Core Curriculum removed references to 'gender ideology'<sup>1</sup> and reframed sexuality education in terms of healthy pregnancies, breastfeeding and heterosexual family life (Vida 2019). The 2021 'child protection' law (2021. évi LXXIX. törvény a pedofil bűnelkövetőkkel szembeni szigorúbb fellépésről, valamint a gyermekek védelme érdekében egyes törvények módosításáról) further restricted discussion of LGBTIQ+ topics in schools and excluded most NGOs from involvement in the delivery of sexuality education (Act LXXIX of 2021), centralising control and narrowing classroom perspectives.

This 'child protection' framing can be read as state-sponsored genderphobia – reflecting an aversion to critically interrogating gender as a social construct, and used to mobilise political anxieties around gender and sexuality (Takács, Fobear, and Schmitsek 2022). Critics argue it rendered LGBTIQ youth socially invisible while reinforcing a narrow, heteronormative model of legitimate reproduction and family life (Herke 2025), leaving reproductive pathways like same-sex parenting omitted from public and educational discourse (Szalma and Alexandra 2024).

Without accompanying investments in teacher education and training or pedagogical support, this legislation created significant uncertainty for biology teachers about what could be safely discussed regarding non-heteronormative reproductive pathways, chilling classroom discussion beyond the law's formal requirements. Lacking clear institutional guidance on sensitive topics, teachers often rely on personal judgement, which can lead to selective coverage or the omission of norm-questioning topics (Pusztai and Csók 2022). Sexuality education in Hungary has thus become a site where broader social norms and inequalities are reproduced through everyday pedagogical practices.

The Hungarian case is therefore particularly instructive: while the curriculum determines where and to what extent MAR formally appears in biology education, the broader political environment shapes how confidently teachers engage its ethical, social and non-heteronormative dimensions. Teachers therefore function not simply as curriculum implementers but as interpreters navigating curricular expectations, institutional norms and perceived political risks. The legal context is now in flux: in April 2026, the Court of Justice of the European Union ruled that key provisions of Act LXXIX of 2021, commonly referred to as the 'child protection' law, including restrictions relating to sexuality education and the portrayal of homosexuality or gender reassignment, violated EU law, although the implications of this for future Hungarian classroom practice remain uncertain (CJEU Court of Justice of the European Union 2026).

## Theoretical background: repronormativity, education, and reproductive governance

The concept of repronormativity helps explain how certain forms of reproduction are naturalised and privileged, while others are marginalised or rendered invisible. It refers to dominant assumptions defining reproduction as biologically based, heterosexual, couple-centred, and morally desirable, establishing a narrow model of legitimate parenthood (Weissman 2017; Mavuso and Chadwick 2022).

Weissman (2017) frames repronormativity as legitimising only state-sanctioned, heteronormative reproduction – specifically the patriarchal family serving the hetero-patriarchal nation-state. Beyond privileging certain family forms, this framework ties female sexuality to reproduction, creating an inevitability of maternity. By determining which reproducers are ‘legitimate’ (married heterosexual couples) versus ‘illegitimate’ (single women, lesbians, trans persons, gay men, or poor women of colour), repronormativity operates through laws, policies and everyday practices – from abortion bans and MAR restrictions to forced sterilisation of ‘undesirable’ populations.

Repronormativity can be understood as a dual injustice, combining maldistribution (unequal access to reproductive knowledge and technologies) and misrecognition (cultural devaluation of non-heteronormative family forms) (Fraser 2003, 2005). Justice requires ‘participatory parity’ – social arrangements enabling all to interact as peers, dependent on both economic conditions and cultural recognition. In education, this means teaching about MAR must fairly distribute factual knowledge while also recognising diverse reproductive pathways as equally worthy.

Feminist and sociological scholarship has long shown reproduction to be a deeply political domain, shaped by gendered power and state interests (Ginsburg and Rapp 1991). In contexts of selective patriotic pronatalism (Szalma and Takács 2025), reproductive norms link closely to national survival, moral order and deserving citizenship. Access to reproductive technologies such as MAR is thus rarely neutral, structured instead by assumptions about who should reproduce, under what conditions, and within what family forms (Lee 2024; Szalma and Pélyi 2025).

While reproductive governance has mainly been examined through law, policy, and medical institutions (Morgan 2019), this article argues education is a crucial, underexplored site of reproductive governance. Schools do not simply transmit reproductive knowledge but actively define the boundaries of legitimate reproduction through routine classroom practices. Biology occupies a privileged position as a seemingly objective, value-free domain, yet research shows biological knowledge is always socially embedded and selectively framed (Allen 2007; Walker et al. 2021). Topics challenging dominant norms – non-heteronormative family forms or MAR – are particularly prone to marginalisation or silence (Formby 2011; Goldstein-Schultz 2022). These silences reflect the hidden curriculum (Jackson 1968) – implicit values transmitted through pedagogical practice rather than formal instruction – which here naturalises heteronormative reproductive futures.

Institutional constraints further narrow what can be taught: limited teaching time, exam-oriented curricula, and teachers’ lack of formal training in reproductive ethics all contribute (Walker et al. 2021), often pushing ethical and social dimensions of

reproduction aside and reinforcing a depoliticised and heteronormative understanding of reproduction (Bittner and Meisert 2021).

Teachers occupy a key mediating role, interpreting curricula and bringing their own moral evaluations into the classroom, shaped by perceived political risks, professional norms, and personal beliefs as much as by official guidelines (Walker et al. 2021) – making them central to how repronormative assumptions are enacted in politically sensitive contexts (Formby 2011; Goldstein-Schultz 2022). Recent research confirms teachers' knowledge of topics like sexual pleasure and LGBTIQ+ diversity predicts more supportive attitudes, and structural embedding of sexuality education – through training, peer reflection, and clear policies – strongly predicts teachers' self-perceived skills to teach inclusive content (Ditzhuijzen and de Looze 2026).

Bringing together scholarship on repronormativity, reproductive governance and education, this article conceptualises school-based MAR teaching as a site where state-defined reproductive norms become everyday knowledge. Rather than treating silences and exclusions as accidental or individual, the analysis treats them as outcomes of intersecting institutional, political, and moral dynamics – offering a more nuanced understanding of how reproductive inequalities are reproduced through education via everyday omission and silence as much as formal restrictions.

## Methodology

This study draws on qualitative, semi-structured interviews with secondary school biology teachers in Hungary, selected because biology is the primary curricular site in which MAR is formally addressed. Data collection aimed to explore how MAR is addressed in classroom practice, and how teachers interpret its relevance, ethical dimensions and pedagogical challenges.

## Data collection

A total of 25 biology teachers were interviewed between April 2020 and April 2023, via telephone – partly necessitated by COVID-19 restrictions, which precluded non-verbal observation but enabled access to geographically dispersed participants. The sample included teachers from general high schools and vocational schools, both state-run and church-run institutions, and schools operating under alternative educational frameworks. To ensure anonymity, locations are indicated only as 'Budapest' or 'rural'.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling to maximise variation across school type, location and institutional affiliation, with only one teacher recruited per school to avoid findings being shaped disproportionately by any single institution's culture. Schools offering the International Baccalaureate were included to capture variation in approaches to sexuality education: although following internationally developed curricula, they operate within the same Hungarian socio-political context, allowing exploration of how national norms intersect with different curricular frameworks. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached.

The sample consisted of 19 women and 6 men, mostly teaching in general secondary schools ( $N = 20$ ), with 4 in vocational education and 1 in an alternative school (for disadvantaged students). Of the schools represented, 16 were state-run, 6 were church-

**Table 1.** Background characteristics of research participants.

| Code | Gender | Type of school                                  | Location of school |
|------|--------|-------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| T1   | female | grammar school                                  | rural              |
| T2   | female | grammar school (church affiliated)              | rural              |
| T3   | female | grammar school                                  | capital city       |
| T4   | female | vocational training school (church affiliated)  | capital city       |
| T5   | female | grammar school                                  | rural              |
| T6   | female | grammar school (international school)           | capital city       |
| T7   | female | vocational training school                      | rural              |
| T8   | female | grammar school                                  | capital city       |
| T9   | male   | grammar school                                  | capital city       |
| T10  | female | grammar school (church affiliated)              | rural              |
| T11  | female | grammar school                                  | rural              |
| T12  | female | alternative school (for disadvantaged students) | capital city       |
| T13  | female | grammar school                                  | rural              |
| T14  | female | grammar school (international school)           | capital city       |
| T15  | male   | vocational training school (church affiliated)  | rural              |
| T16  | male   | grammar school                                  | rural              |
| T17  | male   | grammar school                                  | capital city       |
| T18  | male   | grammar school (church affiliated)              | capital city       |
| T19  | female | grammar school (church affiliated)              | rural              |
| T20  | female | grammar school                                  | rural              |
| T21  | female | grammar school                                  | capital city       |
| T22  | female | vocational training school                      | rural              |
| T23  | female | grammar school                                  | rural              |
| T24  | female | grammar school                                  | rural              |
| T25  | male   | grammar school                                  | rural              |

run, 2 International Baccalaureate, and 1 operated under ethnic minority self-government. [Table 1](#) presents participants' background characteristics.

The interviews were semi-structured, lasting about 30 minutes on average, audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants provided informed verbal consent, and all identifying information was anonymised in the data presentation.

The interview guide covered several key themes: whether and how MAR is incorporated into the curriculum, teachers' perceptions of how prominently it should be addressed, and of students' interest in the topic, and whether and how ethical aspects – including heteronormative assumptions and the handling of surplus embryos – are discussed in class. Teachers were also asked how they prepare to teach MAR, including the sources and strategies they draw on.

### ***Analytical approach***

Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis principles (Braun and Clarke 2006), focussing on patterns in how teachers described the inclusion, framing or omission of MAR. The analysis involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts, and comparison of key themes across interviews, with particular attention given to how normative assumptions about reproduction were articulated or silenced. While primarily inductive, the analysis was also informed by the theoretical framework of repronormativity.

### **Findings**

MAR is present in Hungarian secondary school biology education primarily as a marginal, normatively constrained topic. Although it formally appears in the National Core

Curriculum and graduation requirements, classroom treatment is shaped by exam-oriented priorities, institutional hierarchies across school types, and normative assumptions about legitimate reproduction. Rather than being conveyed as socially embedded reproductive knowledge, MAR is typically reduced to a biologically framed, morally sensitive issue that is easily sidelined. Four interconnected patterns of teacher response were evident in the interviews.

### ***MAR as a marginal topic***

MAR appeared in teachers' descriptions as a formally mandated yet substantively marginal topic. Although it was included in the curriculum, it was typically embedded within broader discussions of infertility and addressed only briefly, often because it carried little weight in graduation exams. As one male teacher from an elite high school in Budapest explained, the curriculum itself signals that MAR does not require serious attention: 'It is only touched upon very superficially in the current curriculum ... formally it cannot be omitted, but in practice we only address it very briefly'. (T18). This framing positioned MAR as knowledge that must be acknowledged but not meaningfully explored.

Several teachers linked this marginalisation directly to the dominance of exam-oriented teaching. Classroom priorities are shaped less by perceived social relevance than by assessment requirements, leading teachers to strategically deprioritise MAR. As one teacher noted, 'It's not about what would be useful for them, but about what they will be examined on'. (T1). Within this logic, MAR becomes expendable knowledge, recognised as existing but not considered worthy of deeper engagement.

Teachers also questioned the relevance of detailed MAR knowledge for adolescents, reinforcing its peripheral status. Such views reflect not only individual perspectives but a broader institutional understanding of MAR as a distant, adult concern rather than a core component of reproductive literacy.

The temporal placement of MAR within the curriculum was seen as further contributing to its marginalisation as it was typically taught in the final years of secondary education, when teaching becomes increasingly exam-centred and time-constrained. As one teacher from a rural high school explained, 'In the last two years everything is focused on the final exams ... in that context, this topic is not really covered, only mentioned briefly' (T1). Teachers did not describe this pattern as affecting MAR alone, often grouping it with other sensitive reproductive topics, when discussing time-related omissions. As another teacher observed, 'Teachers often skip these topics [assisted reproduction, abortion and contraception]. They come at the end, and there is simply no time left. [...] They prefer to leave them out altogether' (T26). This suggests that while time pressure may be a general feature of biology teaching, it disproportionately affects the socially and ethically sensitive aspects of reproduction.

### ***Institutional differentiation by school type***

While MAR remained marginal across the board, its presence varied systematically by school type. In grammar schools, teachers generally at least mentioned MAR, even if only briefly. In vocational and technical secondary schools, however, opportunities to address MAR were far more limited. Teachers emphasised that biology often played a reduced role

or was not compulsory at all, particularly in non-health-related vocational tracks. One teacher from a church-affiliated vocational school in Budapest explained, 'It depends on the vocational track ... In tourism training, for example, biology is not the focus' (T4). She added that even when biology was taught, the curriculum typically covered reproduction only in a narrow biological sense, while MAR itself was absent: 'Reproduction itself is included ... but assisted reproduction is not'.

Teachers with experience from multiple school types also noted that MAR has historically been confined to certain academic tracks: 'It appeared in the grammar school curriculum, but it was not included in vocational secondary schools' (T15). Even when biology was taught in vocational settings, very limited instructional time restricts the depth of coverage. As one teacher reflected on her earlier experience: 'One hour per week ... you have to squeeze everything into that' (T20). Under these time constraints, MAR was among the first topics to be omitted.

A stark contrast emerged in international curricula. Teachers who taught in International Baccalaureate programmes described MAR as a detailed, integrated topic, covering both technical procedures and ethical reflection. As one teacher noted, 'In the school, it is covered in great detail ... and we also discuss ethical issue[s] with the students' (T6). This contrast suggests that the limited treatment of MAR in Hungarian schools reflects national curricular priorities, not merely pedagogical constraints.

### ***Repronormative framing of legitimate reproduction***

Most interviews framed MAR within a heteronormative, couple-based model of reproduction, discussed as a medical solution for heterosexual couples experiencing infertility – implicitly positioning this group as the natural, legitimate subjects of reproductive assistance. This framing was rarely explicit, operating as a taken-for-granted assumption embedded in teachers' language and reasoning.

As one teacher from a church-affiliated rural school stated matter-of-factly, 'It is obviously something that can be understood within a relationship' (T10). The phrasing suggested MAR's legitimacy was self-evident only within heterosexual partnership, rendering other reproductive configurations unintelligible or inappropriate for discussion. These repronormative understandings appeared reproduced through overlapping mechanisms: institutional religious norms, teachers' personal moral evaluations, and the broader political and legal context.

Several teachers rejected MAR as a legitimate option for single women, linking reproductive assistance to a broader educational mission centred on traditional family formation. One teacher stated plainly that 'we are not educating students to have children on their own' (T10), explaining that 'we educate students for building relationships' – framing education as preparation for couplehood rather than diverse life trajectories. MAR is thus reframed from a medical technology into a moral-pedagogical issue, where individual reproductive autonomy is positioned as incompatible with the school's role. Within this logic, presenting MAR as enabling single women to have children would not simply inform students but would actively undermine the normative goal of steering them towards heterosexual partnership and family formation.

References to lesbian couples were even rarer, shaped by different kinds of constraints. In church-affiliated schools, silences primarily reflected institutional religious norms rather

than explicit political considerations. One teacher explained: 'It's not that we condemn them, that they are bad, but as a way of life, that is not [acceptable]. In our Catholic school, homosexuality has not yet appeared as an alternative lifestyle' (T11). Rather than political self-censorship, this illustrates how Catholic educational values continue to define heterosexual couplehood as the normative framework for family life, leaving same-sex relationships outside the educational repertoire of legitimate family forms without explicit condemnation.

Other silences pointed more directly to the broader political and legal environment, with teachers describing sexuality and reproductive diversity as politically sensitive issues, embedded in a wider atmosphere of social taboo and institutional constraint. One teacher from a rural grammar school reflected:

I may be putting this a bit bluntly, but these are what you might call "secular" issues. In Hungary, for a very long time, I think this socialist way of thinking we inherited from the 1980s and 1990s imprisoned these concepts so much and regarded them as such taboos that we haven't really been able to break free from it yet. Just as, let's say, even today in Russia, a gay man or a lesbian woman might be imprisoned – at least that's not the case here yet. But we are still a fairly restrictive country. (T27)

Unlike the previous quotation, which reflects institutional religious norms, this account explicitly situated classroom silence within a broader socio-political climate constraining public discussion of sexual diversity.

Other teachers also demonstrated awareness of the unequal legal framework surrounding medically assisted reproduction. One interviewee explained that when discussing assisted reproduction, she tells students that two women in a relationship do not necessarily need to disclose their partnership when seeking treatment: 'What I usually tell students is that if two women are together, they do not necessarily have to disclose their relationship when seeking treatment, and then it's much easier for them to have a baby' (T7). Rather than expressing personal disapproval, this teacher openly acknowledged the legal exclusion of lesbian couples while discussing the practical strategies some women adopt in response to these restrictions – illustrating how teachers can negotiate politically produced inequalities within classroom discussions.

The repronormative logic also operates through omission. Lesbian couples and their childbearing were not typically discussed as morally wrong or biologically impossible; instead, they were rendered irrelevant to the curriculum. This absence contributes to the reproduction of a narrow model of legitimate reproduction, in which heterosexual couplehood remains the unspoken default. Only a small minority of teachers articulated more inclusive perspectives, often grounded in personal experiences outside Hungary. One teacher, drawing on her international exposure, challenged dominant assumptions by prioritising child well-being over family form: 'I think a child is better off with such a couple than in an institution' (T19). Such statements explicitly decouple good parenting from heterosexuality and biological reproduction. These perspectives, however, remained exceptional, lacking institutional support and rarely translating into systematic pedagogical practice.

School-based teaching about MAR not only reflects existing social norms but actively participates in defining the boundaries of legitimate reproduction. Through taken-for-granted assumptions, religious and institutional norms, teachers' own moral

evaluations, and politically conditioned silences, biology education aligns reproductive knowledge with a narrow, heteronormative model of family, while marginalising or erasing alternative reproductive pathways. This shapes not only what students learn, but also their understanding of the possibilities and limits of legitimate family formation.

Beyond the institutional level, a repronormative logic was mediated through the teachers' personal moral evaluations. Several interviewees explicitly distinguished between their own moral positions and what they felt able or obliged to teach. For some, personal ethical reservations about MAR shaped how the topic was framed, even when teachers emphasised their intention to remain 'objective'. One interviewee openly acknowledged his own conservative views on family formation:

From this perspective, I am quite conservative. When we have children, we provide them with a model. I am not sure that ... of course heterosexual people can also be terrible parents ... I would not give parental permission to many heterosexual couples either, so it is not simply about sexual orientation. Nevertheless, I would prefer adoptive parents to be a man and a woman. (T28)

This quotation illustrates how teachers' personal moral beliefs may reinforce heterosexual couplehood as the preferred family form, even when these beliefs are presented as personal opinions rather than professional prescriptions.

Another teacher similarly acknowledged a tension between her personal beliefs and her professional responsibility, stating: 'Personally, I do not agree with it, but I do not want to conceal the facts' (T17). Although she expressed personal reservations about medically assisted reproduction, she nevertheless emphasised that it should not be omitted from classroom teaching.

Other teachers expressed their views more cautiously, emphasising uncertainty rather than rejection. One interviewee explained that ethical questions surrounding MAR were difficult to discuss because they were deeply tied to personal values: 'One must carefully consider the circumstances ... we don't know which of them will end up in this situation'. (T11). In such cases, moral ambivalence often translated into pedagogical restraint, reinforcing silence rather than opening space for discussion. At the same time, a few teachers explicitly reflected on the tension between their private opinions and their pedagogical responsibilities. One teacher emphasised the importance of separating personal beliefs from her classroom teaching, particularly in relation to non-heteronormative family forms: 'I always try to be neutral and tell them not to judge'. (T23). These reflections suggest that teachers' personal evaluations do not mechanically determine classroom practice but interact with institutional norms, perceived political and legal constraints, and professional role expectations.

Teachers' moral positions thus function as an additional layer through which repronormative boundaries are negotiated and reproduced. Rather than appearing as explicit value statements, these positions are often expressed indirectly – for example, through omission – further contributing to the normalisation of heterosexual couplehood as the default framework for legitimate reproduction. In this sense, repronormativity emerges not only as a discursive pattern but as an institutionalised mode of regulating reproductive futures.

### ***Ethical controversy, silence and institutional constraints***

Ethical considerations can be seen as a central yet ambivalent element in teaching about MAR. Teachers often framed MAR not as a form of reproductive healthcare but as a moral problem. Some articulated this explicitly, for example by emphasising embryo loss<sup>2</sup>: 'Here, we are indeed ending lives that have already been conceived and have begun to develop' (T11).

Others expressed this more cautiously, describing the topic as ethically sensitive and difficult to handle pedagogically: 'These are topics that are not easily traceable in textbooks, not really clarified, and if a teacher says something and a student picks out a piece and tells it at home, then serious problems can sometimes arise' (T24). Because of this, ethical sensitivity does not open space for discussion but rather justifies restraint.

Silence can also play a key role in the marginalisation of the topic. Several teachers reported that issues related to sexuality and reproduction were often avoided: 'Many colleagues simply skip this part because it is awkward' (T17). This pattern was further reinforced by structural constraints such as limited lesson time, exam pressure and gaps in teacher training: 'So at university, not a word was said about this'. (T21). A particular dilemma could arise from the presence of students conceived through MAR, potentially leading to self-censorship. As one teacher reflected, 'There was a sibling pair, twins, who themselves said that they were born through an IVF programme. I taught them in elementary school' (T21).

These elements do not operate in isolation but reinforce one another: ethical uncertainty narrows the boundaries of legitimate discussion, structural constraints facilitate avoidance, and silence sustains the marginalisation of the topic. As a result, MAR becomes both morally charged and pedagogically peripheral within school-based education.

In contrast, international curricula displayed a different pattern. In International Baccalaureate programmes, MAR was integrated into a broader framework combining biological knowledge with ethical reflection and interdisciplinary discussion: 'this is not just a topic for a biology lesson, we discuss it across subjects, including its ethical dimensions' (T6). This suggests that the marginalisation of MAR is not a consequence of its inherent sensitivity, but rather (at least in part) the result of institutional and curricular choices.

### ***Teachers' preparation and sources of knowledge***

Teachers unanimously reported that MAR was not talked about at all as part of their university training. Several interviewees emphasised that during their teacher education and training, neither as part of biology teaching methodology nor as an ethical or social issue did they encounter the subject of MAR. As one of them put it: 'Well, it didn't come up at all during my university training, I can absolutely confirm that' (T8). Consequently, most teachers felt they had been left without institutional support or formal preparation to teach a topic that was medically, ethically and politically sensitive.

Teachers therefore typically relied on self-education and informal sources of knowledge when teaching MAR. Several mentioned that they tried to inform themselves through internet searches, media content, or the experiences of their own circle of

acquaintances. One teacher formulated this as follows: 'You know as much as you hear about it as an ordinary person, you see situations, you meet people who tell you about their own lives' (T21). Others believed that the necessary basic information was relatively easily accessible through independent study, yet ethical questions were far more difficult to handle. A biology and religion teacher working in a church-run school, for example, stated that 'through self-education one can nowadays quickly acquire the information that is sufficient at primary or secondary school level' (T16).

At the same time, significant differences of opinion emerged regarding ethical issues, which largely depended on the individual teacher's value system, making it much harder for them to find their way in this area. As one female teacher from a rural grammar school put it:

It is my firm conviction that colleagues are less open, and this may be due to personality, but also to the fact that perhaps they are afraid of becoming personally involved with the topic through their students. (T24)

The individualised and fragmented character of knowledge acquisition can significantly contribute to the teaching of MAR remaining uncertain, inconsistent and highly teacher-dependent. Since no uniform pedagogical guidelines or up-to-date educational materials are available, teachers rely on their own moral judgements, personal experiences and informal sources of knowledge. The absence of formal preparation does not simply produce knowledge gaps; it individualises the negotiation of repronormative assumptions, leaving teachers to rely on their own moral and information resources. This further reinforces the tendency for MAR to appear primarily within a narrow biological framework, while its social, ethical and reproductive justice dimensions are marginalised or completely silenced. Because of this, the deficiencies in teachers' preparation cannot be interpreted solely as individual knowledge gaps since these mainly derive from the institutional regulation of reproductive knowledge.

## Discussion

This study examined how MAR is addressed in Hungarian secondary school biology education and how broader reproductive norms are translated into everyday classroom practice. The findings show that MAR occupies a highly ambivalent position within Hungarian secondary school biology education: although formally included in the curriculum, it remains pedagogically marginal, ethically sensitive and strongly constrained by heteronormative assumptions about legitimate reproduction and family formation.

The analysis demonstrated that the marginalisation of MAR did not primarily operate through explicit prohibition or open exclusion. Rather, it was reproduced through more subtle mechanisms of omission, caution, selective framing and pedagogical avoidance. Teachers frequently described MAR as a topic that is formally acknowledged but not meaningfully explored, often due to limited instructional time, exam-oriented curricula, lack of pedagogical preparation, and concerns about ethical or political sensitivity. In this sense, silence itself emerges as a key mechanism through which reproductive norms are maintained within educational settings. The findings therefore extend existing scholarship on repronormativity by showing how normative reproductive boundaries can be

reproduced not only through law and policy but also through everyday educational practices and institutional silences.

The discrepancy between the growing policy importance of MAR and its limited presence in school biology can highlight that policy priorities do not automatically translate into educational content. Although access to MAR has become an increasingly visible element of selective pronatalist policy, curriculum development, teaching materials and classroom practices have changed more slowly and continue to be shaped primarily by examination requirements and established pedagogical routines. This temporal mismatch illustrates that educational institutions may reproduce reproductive norms in ways that only partially reflect broader policy developments.

The findings further suggest that sexuality education in Hungary continues to operate within a narrowly heteronormative and couple-centred framework. In this study, MAR was consistently discussed by teachers as a medical solution for heterosexual couples experiencing infertility, while reproductive pathways involving single women or same-sex couples remained largely absent from classroom discussions. Importantly, these exclusions rarely appeared as explicit moral condemnation. Instead, they were framed as institutionally inappropriate, politically sensitive, or incompatible with the perceived educational role of schools. This reflects how repronormativity functions not only through direct exclusion but also through the normalisation of heterosexual couplehood as the unspoken default framework of legitimate reproduction (Formby 2011; Roseneil et al. 2020).

Our findings also highlight how different forms of silence surrounding medically assisted reproduction should not be interpreted as manifestations of a single underlying mechanism. While some silences reflected the institutional ethos of church-affiliated schools, others emerged from teachers' own moral evaluations, their limited knowledge or from their perceptions of a restrictive political and legal environment. Rather than being generated by a single source, repronormative boundaries were co-produced through the interaction of institutional norms, individual knowledges and moral beliefs, and the broader socio-political context.

Distinguishing between these mechanisms offers a more nuanced understanding of how repronormativity is reproduced through school-based sexuality education. It also suggests that teachers should not be understood merely as passive transmitters of policy. Rather, the silences surrounding MAR emerge from the interaction between institutional conditions – including curriculum structure, examination requirements, school ethos and broader pronatalist policy priorities – and teachers' discretionary decisions about what can realistically be taught within these constraints. As a result, teachers act as street-level bureaucrats (Lipsky 2010), translating institutional priorities into everyday pedagogical practice. Importantly, the limited discussion of MAR cannot be attributed solely to individual attitudes or ideological positioning but must also be understood in relation to broader institutional conditions, including limited training opportunities, fragmented educational resources, and restrictive political environments (Walker et al. 2021; Pusztai and Csók 2022).

The Hungarian case also speaks to broader international debates surrounding sexuality education and anti-gender politics. Tensions between biologically oriented sexuality education, political regulation of gender-related topics, and the marginalisation of LGBTIQ+ perspectives have been documented in several Central and Eastern European

contexts (Kuhar and Rok 2025; Takács, Fobear, and Schmitsek 2022) and beyond (Venegas 2022). Hungary provides a particularly visible example of how selective pronatalist politics and restrictive educational policies intersect in shaping reproductive knowledge. At the same time, the contrast between Hungarian state curricula and International Baccalaureate programmes demonstrates that alternative pedagogical approaches are possible. In contexts where ethical reflection, interdisciplinarity and critical discussion are institutionally supported, MAR can be addressed as a broader social and ethical issue rather than merely as a narrowly biological topic.

More broadly, the findings demonstrated that reproductive knowledge is unequally distributed across school types. Students attending vocational schools in Hungary receive substantially less biology education than those enrolled in grammar schools, limiting their opportunities to engage not only with medically assisted reproduction but with sexual and reproductive health more generally. These institutional differences may contribute to the unequal distribution of reproductive knowledge across different social groups, reinforcing existing educational and social inequalities. Moreover, single women and lesbian couples are rendered invisible – a clear instance of misrecognition that undermines participatory parity (Fraser 2003, 2005). These assumptions operate not only through explicit regulation, but also through everyday practices, discourses and institutions that normalise some reproductive pathways while problematising or silencing others.

The findings highlight the importance of schools as key sites in the regulation of reproductive knowledge. Educational practices do not merely transmit information about reproduction but actively shape how young people understand the legitimacy, desirability, and social boundaries of different reproductive pathways. The study therefore argues that reproductive inequalities are reproduced not only through legal restrictions or unequal access to reproductive technologies, but also through everyday pedagogical practices that determine which reproductive futures become visible, discussable, and socially imaginable within educational contexts.

### **Limitations**

Several study limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on qualitative interviews with biology teachers and therefore reflects teachers' accounts rather than direct classroom observations. Second, although the sample included teachers from diverse institutional settings, some school types were represented by only a small number of participants. In particular, findings concerning International Baccalaureate schools were based on only two interviews and should therefore be interpreted as exploratory rather than generalisable.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined how MAR is addressed within Hungarian secondary school biology education and how broader reproductive norms are translated into everyday pedagogical practice. The findings highlighted that although formally present in the curriculum, MAR remains pedagogically marginal and strongly shaped by heteronormative assumptions about legitimate reproduction, family formation and – especially women's – reproductive citizenship.

The findings showed that reproductive inequalities are reproduced not only through formal policy restrictions, but also through omission, selective visibility, pedagogical silence and the uneven distribution of reproductive knowledge across educational settings. Schools function as important sites of reproductive governance, shaping which reproductive pathways become socially imaginable, legitimate and discussable. By focusing on teachers as constrained mediators operating within politically and institutionally regulated environments, the study contributes to scholarship on sexuality education, reproductivity and reproductive governance.

Future research could complement interview-based approaches with classroom ethnography – similar to Rédei's (2019) reflexive ethnographic work – using curriculum analysis and student perspectives in order to further explore how reproductive norms are negotiated in classroom interactions, curricula and students' own interpretations of sexuality education. Comparative research across different educational and political contexts may also help illuminate how selective pronatalism shapes reproductive knowledge beyond the Hungarian context.

## Notes

1. In government-aligned anti-gender discourse, 'gender ideology' has been presented as an ideological challenge to biologically defined sex and traditional family values; its removal formed part of a wider shift towards emphasising biological sex and heterosexual family life in education (Vida 2019).
2. In IVF, several embryos may be created, but not all are transferred. Remaining embryos may be cryopreserved; some may not survive freezing and thawing, while embryos that are no longer required may ultimately be discarded.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Ivett Szalma:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Judit Takács:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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## Data availability statement

Interview data to support the findings of this study are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. Anonymised data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to ethical and legal considerations.

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