

# Challenging Limits in Education – Towards a Queer Pedagogical Approach of Sexual Diversity in The Netherlands

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## Introduction: the question that should not be asked?

*At the start of a new school year, two girls are sitting in the front row seats of the classroom. ‘Do you have a husband?’ one girl wearing oversized glasses asks. It must be a pressing question to her, as she asked me the same thing last week. ‘No, I don’t have a husband’. The girls look at each other and ask me with pity in their voices: ‘Do you live all by yourself?’ ‘No, I don’t live by myself’. With even more pity in their voices, they ask: ‘But... you’re not still living with your parents, are you?’ ‘No, I no longer live with my parents’. I expected the next question to involve pets. But one pupil thinks of a different question: ‘Do you have ...eh, well... eh...I’m probably not allowed to ask...’ When I convinced her that all questions were permitted, she finally asked: ‘Well, do you have a girlfriend?’ And all of a sudden, more eyes looked at me curiously...*

Why is it that my pupil thought she was allowed to ask if I have a husband, but felt uncomfortable asking me about a girlfriend? This article discusses heteronormativity<sup>1</sup> in education and the way the queer pedagogical perspective attempts to address, criticize and undermine this. Schools in the Netherlands<sup>2</sup> are required (since December the 1<sup>st</sup> 2012, by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science) to include lessons on sexuality and sexual diversity in the curriculum. This article therefore takes this requirement as the starting point for addressing heteronormativity in education.

## Mandatory class discussions about sexuality

This article focuses primarily on the requirement for secondary education (VO). Children in the Netherlands attend VO between the ages of twelve to sixteen, seventeen or eighteen years depending on the level of education. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW) has formulated a number of headlines for secondary education. These headlines are intended as guidelines for the curriculum and function as the minimum requirements to the level of knowledge and skills that children acquire. The following was added to headline VO 43: ‘with attention to sexuality and sexual diversity’. The modified headline now runs as follows: “The pupil learns about similarities, differences and changes in culture and life views in The Netherlands, learns to relate this

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<sup>1</sup> “As a term, heteronormativity describes the processes through which social institutions and social policies reinforce the belief that human beings fall into two distinct sex/gender categories: male/man and female/woman. This belief (or ideology) produces a correlative belief that those two sexes/genders exist in order to fulfill complementary roles, i.e., that all intimate relationships ought to exist between males/men and females/women. To describe a social institution as heteronormative means that it has visible or hidden norms, some of which are viewed as normal only for males/men and others which are seen as normal only for females/women. As a concept, heteronormativity is used to help identify the processes through which individuals who do not appear to “fit” or individuals who refuse to “fit” these norms are made invisible and silenced.” Mary Queen, Kathleen Farrell and Nisha Gupta in: *Interrupting Heteronormativity*, The Graduate School of Syracuse University 2004, 3.

<sup>2</sup> Education in the Netherlands is divided into primary (PO), secondary education (VO), secondary vocational education (MBO) and higher education (HO).

to his own and other ways of life, learns the significance of respecting each other's views and lifestyles in society, *and learns to deal in a respectful manner with sexuality and diversity within society, including sexual diversity*.<sup>3</sup>

This modification implements the motions Pechtold c.s.<sup>4</sup> and Van Der Ham c.s.<sup>5</sup>, which state that 'attention to sexuality and sexual diversity in education is of great importance for sexual empowerment, a safe school environment, tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality'. It is remarkable that homosexuality is made explicit here, while other forms of sexual diversity are left unmentioned. This article focuses on this particular emphasis on tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality leading to the adjustment of headline VO 43, when it comes to heteronormativity in education.

### **Towards a safe learning environment**

Two recent studies, focusing specifically on gay acceptance in schools, show the importance of the modification of VO headline 43 for the purpose of gaining greater acceptance of sexual diversity and creating a safe school environment. For example, the SCP study (Keuzenkamp, 2010) shows that in secondary education, homosexuality is accepted less than in secondary vocational education, college and university. Research by EduDivers, centre for education and sexual diversity (Dankmeijer; Schouten, 2013), shows that two-thirds of high school students stay away from gay peers or feel unsure about contacting them.

These studies show it is of paramount importance to pay attention to notions of sexual identity and the role they play in the acceptance – or rejection – of sexual diversity. As stated in headline VO 43, schools are obligated to pay attention to sexual diversity, but retain the freedom to decide how to achieve this goal. Many schools have expressed the need for specific tools to achieve this: how can we address sexual diversity in school? Several Dutch LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual) organizations, such as the COC<sup>6</sup>, have developed teaching materials that can assist schools in the implementation of headline VO 43. LCC, an umbrella organization of several Christian LGBT organizations, has developed teaching materials specifically for Protestant schools.<sup>7</sup> Part of the education material developed by both COC and LCC-projects, is a meeting with a homosexual who comes to the classroom to tell his or her story.

### **Confirm or challenge the status quo?**

The studies mentioned in the previous paragraph show that in the VO schools are often unsafe for teenagers who identify themselves as other than 'heterosexual'. The modification of headline VO 43 assumes that by paying specific attention to homosexuality, the school would become a safer learning environment with tolerance for and acceptance of homosexuality. However, this raises the

<sup>3</sup> <https://abonneren.rijksoverheid.nl/article/primair-onderwijs/nieuwsbrief-primair-onderwijs-nummer-70/aanpassing-kerndoelen/1423/14670> (02-11-2013)

<sup>4</sup> Kamerstukken II, 2009-2010, 27 017, nr. 59.

<sup>5</sup> Kamerstukken, 2010-2011, 27 017, nr. 78.

<sup>6</sup> COC Netherlands is a Dutch association for the integration of lesbians, gay, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBT). This association is founded in 1946 and committed to equal rights, emancipation and social acceptance of LGBT's in The Netherlands and abroad. <http://www.coc.nl>

<sup>7</sup> In addition to public schools, there are special schools in The Netherlands. Public schools are directed by the local government. Special schools are directed by a foundation or association with a particular religious or educational conviction.

question whether specific attention to homosexuality does not in fact confirm the binary organization of sexuality in 'straight versus gay' and therefore actually promotes stigmatization. Furthermore, the way in which these identity categories function can be criticized. I will now consider both of these aspects.

*"Do you have a husband?"*

To what extent does specific attention to homosexuality confirm the binary organization of sexuality in 'straight versus gay'? Homosexuality is approached as something that must be tolerated and accepted by the not-homosexuals, that is: the expected heterosexuals. Røthing speaks in this context of "the classroom conceptualized as one united heterosexual 'we'".<sup>8</sup> The gay person has to come out before he or she can come in, while the straight person is already 'in'. One can compare this coming-out with a confession: 'I'm not like you'. This confession is not without difficulties, because it makes the gay person risking his or her self by depending on the possible acceptance or rejection of others. The straight people in the classroom are placed in a privileged position because they don't have to confess their sexuality and they have the power to accept or reject the person identified as gay. Sedgwick (1990) has problematized this binary organization of sexuality by showing that it assumes heterosexuality as the norm (the ordinary, natural form of sexuality), while homosexuality is assumed as a derivative (the unusual, unnatural form of sexuality) of this norm. The example with which I began my article reveals the hidden heteronormative assumptions of my pupil. Røthing shows in her article, based on classroom observations of sexual education that addresses homosexuality in Norway, that in stories of gay persons in educational materials which are used to promote gay tolerance, it is not recognized how heterosexual students should relate to these stories. In this way, special attention to homosexuality fails to unmask the privileged position of heterosexuality and thereby heteronormativity in society and school.

*To be gay or to become gay*

Besides confirming the binary organization of sexuality, as mentioned above, paying specific attention to homosexuality also proposes sexual identity as something that is stable and essential so that it can be categorized in 'to be gay' versus 'to be straight'. Butler (1993) criticizes the use of such identity categories that represent sexuality as something that can be categorized. In her gender theory described in *Gender Trouble*, she undermines the idea that gender and sexuality are fundamental truths about human selves. On the contrary, she speaks of 'performativity': gender and sexuality are formed and learned behavior that are constructed in a process of imitation, repetition and confirmation. Butler also criticizes the kind of thought behind heterosexual normativity, because it presumes that there is first a sex that is expressed through a gender, and then through a sexuality. The very categories of sex, sexual identity, are produced or maintained in the effects of this compulsory performance. In this way, the heterosexual norm produces to legitimate itself as the origin of all sex.<sup>9</sup> These comments of Butler concerning sexual identity are useful to analyze how sexual identity categories function in a school environment. In view of a safe school environment, where the gay pupil must be made visible in a context of increasing gay acceptance, it seems

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<sup>8</sup> Røthing, Å., "Homotolerance and heteronormativity in Norwegian classrooms," in *Gender and Education* 20:3 (2008), 261.

<sup>9</sup> Butler, J., "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," in: H. Abelove, M.A. Barale & D.M. Halperin (ed.) *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1993, 318.

understandable to start from an essentialist view of sexual identity. The idea of 'being gay' as innate and therefore a fixed feature that will be discovered sooner or later and which then has to be clarified in their own life situation, places the gay person in a position which he has not chosen and therefore needs tolerance and understanding. The conditions of this gay tolerance, namely the authentic and confessed identity, reaffirm the heterosexual norm.<sup>10</sup> Heterosexuality is assumed as a sexual identity which can be examined and tested in relation to the other without wondering 'Am I straight?' In contrast, examining and trying out homosexuality assumes an affirmative answer to the question 'Am I gay?' Such a binary presentation of a straight and gay identity also fails to recognize and make room for the diversity, fluidity and complexity of sexual identities and how this identity is shaped in the process of identity-formation of an individual in relation to his or her environment. In conclusion, it can be argued that specific attention to homosexuality in education does not promote tolerance and acceptance of sexual diversity. As indicated above, it is highly likely that this specific attention in fact reinforces rather than challenges the status quo, namely the heterosexual norm. It leaves us with the question: how can we address sexual diversity in schools? Queer pedagogy, a recently developed perspective focusing on the recognition of sexual diversity, provides an opportunity to criticize and discuss the normative knowledge structures about sexuality in education. Next in this article is an exploration of the possibilities of queer pedagogical perspectives for the implementation of headline VO 43. First it examines the origins and objectives of queer pedagogical perspectives.

### **Queer pedagogy: calling into question**

The educational perspective that is central in this article is a pedagogical reflection on queer theory. The term 'queer' can be explained in various ways. Cheng, a queer theologian, makes a threefold classification: 1) queer as an 'umbrella' term that refers to people with marginalized sexualities and/or gender identities; 2) queer as 'transgressive action' which refers to the questioning and transgressing of social norms, especially in the context of sexuality and gender identity; 3) queer as 'erasing boundaries' which refers to queer theory as an academic discipline, which emerged in the 90s of the last century (Foucault; Butler; Jagose; Halperin).<sup>11</sup> According to Hennesy, 'queer' is generally seen as calling into question conventional concepts of sexual identity by deconstructing categories, opposites and comparisons which seem to hold these concepts in place.<sup>12</sup> One of the things queer theory focuses on is the questioning of the heterosexual norm and ideas that suggest that sexual identity is fixed.

Queer pedagogy (Bryson & de Castell 1993; Britzman 1995; Schippert 2006) is a more specific form of queer theory, as it is applied in the pedagogical discipline. In addition to queer theory, queer pedagogy is grounded in critical pedagogy (Habermas; Horkheimer; Adorno) and includes investigating the role of identity in the classroom, the (power) relationship between student and teacher and the way in which knowledge is achieved in this relationship, as well as the organization of teaching and learning in the context of social ordering and dominant discourses of gender and sexuality. Thereby, queer pedagogy relocates the discussion of homosexuality. It no longer focuses on homosexuality as a disturbing and disruptive factor, but problematizes the social and cultural orderings that are

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<sup>10</sup> Røthing, Å., "Homotolerance and heteronormativity in Norwegian classrooms," in *Gender and Education* 20:3 (2008), 264.

<sup>11</sup> Cheng, Patrick S., *Radical Love: An introduction to Queer Theology*, New York: Seabury Books, 2011, 3-8.

<sup>12</sup> Hennesy, R., "Queer Theory, Left Politics," in *Rethinking Marxism* 7:3 (1994), 94.

founded upon essentialist concepts of gender and sexual identity. The criticism raised earlier in this article with regard to the specific attention for homosexuality in schools is therefore an example of queer pedagogical criticism: it reveals the underlying heteronormativity, as well as the essentialist approach to sexuality.

### **Disrupting the status quo**

In the queer pedagogical perspective, the main issue is to analyze, criticize and problematize normalizing processes regarding sexual and gender identity. Quinlivan & Town (1994), based on their study of queer youth in education, list as one of the examples of such normalizing processes the maintenance of silence.<sup>13</sup> Many of the participants in this study felt isolated and invisible within the school, because there was no reflection on their emerging sexuality. However, even if homosexuality is a centered subject, the possibility exists that this affirms these normalizing processes. Considering this, in what way does the queer pedagogical perspective create opportunities to question and disrupt heteronormativity?

According to Quinlivan & Town, the queer pedagogical opportunities are in creating an environment in which heterosexuality can be deconstructed, discussed and examined rather than assumed. For example, the role schools play in fostering feelings of abnormality of queer youth can be called into question. When education about homosexuality is founded in learning about respect and social equality, as stated in the backgrounds of headline VO 43, the queer pedagogical perspective puts into question this foundation: to what extent are gay youths reduced to normalized and respected subjects by heterosexuals? Are gay youths thus reduced to the problem of remedying homophobia? And is there room for other sexual identities, and if so, to what extent? This perspective can therefore provide an alternative to the binary organization of gay/straight by proposing sexuality as a 'shifting changing continuum'.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, identity is no longer depicted as fixed. In addition, this perspective broadens the foundation of education about sexuality. Besides talking about respect and social equality, one can form a queer perspective talk about desires that people in life discover in relation to each other.<sup>15</sup> Homosexual desires are no longer central as deviant desires. Everybody is, and all desires are, different. Difference becomes the starting point.

### **Intervening normalcy**

Queer pedagogy unmask and undermines the normalizing processes in education: What place have normality and abnormality been assigned in education? And how can we undermine this organization of normality and abnormality? According to Britzman, queer theological insights offer critical methods to mark the repetitions of normalcy as a structure and as pedagogy.<sup>16</sup> For example, by the study of limits: what are the unmarked criteria that work to dismiss certain knowledge as irrelevant and valorize other knowledge as relevant? A queer pedagogy begins where structures of subordination and subjection are investigated. In

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<sup>13</sup> Quinlivan, K. & Town, S., "Queer pedagogy, educational practice and lesbian and gay youth," in *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 12:5 (1999), 514-518.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 518-523.

<sup>15</sup> Britzman expresses it as follows: "In its positivity, Queer Theory offers methods of imagining difference on its own terms: as eros, as desire, and as the grounds of politicality. It is a particular articulation that returns us to practices and to bodies of practices." Britzmann, Deborah P., "Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight," in *Educational Theory* 45:2 (1995), 214.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

the practical example with which I began my article, my student searched for the limit of what she could and was allowed to know. She came across the boundary of what she thought she was allowed to ask: 'Do you have ...eh, well... eh...I'm probably not allowed to ask...'

Furthermore, something else happened: the student had a dialogue with herself that brought her not just across the line of what she is allowed to imagine, but also lead her to recognize diversity. Not all female teachers have a relationship with a man. It was precisely this difference, which made the question scary to her and she felt unsure whether she was allowed to ask this question. Yet she did. By doing this, she goes beyond the limit of 'daring to ask', which shows that she is determined to find out the 'true nature' of my relationship. However, this particular example shows how my pupil still thinks in a heteronormative frame. Britzman speaks in her queer pedagogical criticism about 'risking the self'<sup>17</sup> when one takes the risk of refusing secure thought. She argues that the construction of safety precisely endangers difference: "So that no one is safe because the very construct of safety places at risk difference as uncertainty, as indeterminacy, as incompatibility."<sup>18</sup> These insights of Britzman concerning difference and safety, are interesting for the critical questioning of the backgrounds of headline VO 43 in which it is argued that attention to sexual diversity would be necessary to ensure a safe learning environment. Difference, according to Britzman, also involves uncertainty, indeterminacy and incompatibility. Difference puts the imagined narrative of the self into question: who am I becoming in relation to the other?

Britzman provides us with a queer pedagogical criticism by which we can expose and undermine normalizing processes in education. It seems to me that a practical application of this criticism in the curriculum, the school policy and the pedagogical relation between teacher and student is needed. How can queer pedagogy be deployed in order to expose and undermine normalizing processes? What could a queer educational curriculum look like? Such a practical application should also provide for queer pedagogical insights regarding safety, difference, knowledge and identity formation.

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<sup>17</sup> Britzmann, Deborah P., "Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight," in *Educational Theory* 45:2 (1995), 226.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.