Sexuality and Gender at School: The Perspective of Heteronormativity and the Stories of Non-Heterosexual Young People

**Abstract**

The study deals with the sexuality and gender of young people and the way they get expressed in various practices at school. I interviewed 30 non-heterosexual young people, 16 girls and 14 boys. Their ages ranged from 15 to 20 years. The reason to interview non-heterosexual young people was my interest in their experiences, and the assumption that non-heterosexual youth have more memories of heteronormativity. I analysed their stories, and, on the basis of the interviews, reconstructed school practices and studied ways of challenging and maintaining heteronormativity. The study draws largely on gender-specific studies in the sociology of education as well as on lesbian and gay studies. For gender analysis and the study of performativity, Judith Butler provided useful theoretical ideas. Other important scholars were Tuula Gordon, Elina Lahelma, Sinikka Aapola, Tarja Palmu, Tarja Tolonen, Helena Saarikoski, Janet Holland, Debbie Epstein, Mairtin MacAnGhaill, James Sears, and Jeffrey Weeks. I am involved in a research project "Citizenship, Difference and Marginality at School – with Special Reference to Gender", lead by Tuula Gordon.

I research at the construction of sexuality and gender in school practices. I analyse the ways in which heteronormativity becomes intertwined in these practices. Heteronormativity involves the idea that heterosexual masculinity for men and heterosexual femininity for women are seen as self-evident, or natural basis for gender and sexuality, or that they are presented as something better compared to other alternatives. I analyse sex education as well as the gendered sports and craft education at school, and the behaviour of teachers. I study the relationships between young people, abusive words and bullying based on gender or sexuality, as well as the stories dealing with sexuality told. I am interested in the ways non-heterosexuality is both manifested and concealed. I look at the use of space and embodiment. I analyse the three layers of school: the official school with its textbooks and organisation of teaching, the informal school involving the informal relationships between students, and the physical school with the various uses of space and body. School cultures vary from one school to another and even within one school depending on the way students and teachers feel about these practices. Ideas about yourself in terms of gender and sexuality are formed as part of the school practices which, in turn, interact with the surrounding culture and society. Heteronormativity and the ways it is challenged get expressed in the school practices in many ways. Heterosexual masculinity for men and heterosexual femininity for women are conceived as something natural and depicted as the only present and future alternative. Other alternatives are not brought up, or they are presented as something questionable. Alternative gender and sexual behaviours are controlled by teachers and, in particular, by students themselves. Some young people are put in an unfair position. Because of heteronormative practices, some students avoid close relationships with their peers, or choices transgressing the gender boundaries. School practices also include various ways of challenging heteronormativity by both the school employees and students. The practices of heteronormativity themselves enable its challenging, and the challenging of heteronormativity may, in turn, lead to attempts to maintain it.

**Keywords**

- school practices - sexuality
- sexuality - schools
- gender - school
- heterosexuality - homosexuality - sexual education
- heterosexism - heteronormativity

**Where deposited**

Muita tietoja - Övriga uppgifter - Additional information