



Homo- and bisexual teachers' ways of relating to the heteronorm



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ABSTRACT

Although legislation has made achievements to strengthen the rights of homosexual people in many European countries, the school setting seems to be a place where it can be hard to be open as a homosexual person. This article presents articulations of what it is to be homo- or bisexual as a teacher, based on a discourse analysis. The empirical material suggests two different discursive approaches described as vigilance and resource, suggesting different realities of these teachers. It is interpreted that it is not enough only to rely on laws and a positive mind-set of the general public. An explicit support from colleagues is suggested to be crucial to facilitate this group's prerequisites to participate equally compared to norm conforming colleagues.

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1. Introduction

This article sets out to examine the voices of a small group of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) teachers' voices as they share their experiences of being an LGB person in a school setting (preschool included). Although, these subject positions are nowadays quite frequently seen in society, few of us have had a teacher that is openly homo- or bisexual. In research it is possible to find some examples of recent research on these teachers' experiences. Those examples, however, often tend to address problems and troubles although that is not the purpose. With this article, these subject positions, albeit seldom seen in school, are brought to the fore in order to show how these teachers articulate their situation. In some contrast to previous research on the matter, the project presented here specifically, but not exclusively, embraces voices experiencing being a LGB person as a resource.

Research question: How can LGB teachers' relate to being or coming out in school be understood?

1.1. Being a LGB person in society and in school

In many European countries the rights of LGB people have been strengthened. In Sweden for example, the anti-discrimination act (SFS, 2008: 567) specifically address discrimination towards LGB people although the law also provides legal support for other groups. Sweden is usually considered an open and liberal society when it comes to legal rights and attitudes towards LGB people. In the European Value Survey (European Value Survey, 2008) on the public attitudes towards homosexuality, 54.9% answered that they *always* justify homosexuality (Q68H), implying that a majority had chosen the maximum value on a ten-level scale. The same value for the participating countries in total was 12.7%. However, the situation for LGB people in school seems to be more complex compared to the more liberal and accepting attitudes of society in

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general. There, the visibility of LGB people seems to be lacking, and heteronormative attitudes seem to prevail. International research on this matter (Buston & Hart, 2001; Epstein, 1994; Herek, 2004) has revealed schools to be rather heteronormative and heterosexist, generally assuming that everyone within its settings is heterosexual. A study conducted by Kjaran and Kristinsdóttir (2015) similarly indicated that institutionalized heterosexism prevails in the structure and culture of the schools in Iceland. The heterosexism is part of the teachers' setting that they need to address. However, the LGB teachers are also a part of these norms, and therefore it is important to understand their perspectives. A LGB teacher is likely not only to experience prevailing sexuality norms but also contribute to development. In *Speaking the unspeakable*, Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma and Hemingway (2008) explain the benefits with having open homo- and bisexual teachers to show the diversity in society. By these means students are offered opportunities to identify with homosexual people, they argue. The research presented in this article addresses LGB teachers' situation by focusing on a few homo- and bisexual teachers' voices as they describe their experiences of being an LGB person in a school setting.

1.2. The heteronorm

The norm concept is a key concept to the study, and the crucial norm for LGB people is the heteronorm. In this article, the notion that everybody is heterosexual and wishes to live in heterosexual partnership is defined as heteronorm. Warner (1993, p. xxi) defined the concept heteronorm and he argues that . . .

. . . so much privilege lies in heterosexual culture's exclusive ability to interpret itself as society. Het[ero] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the invisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist.

The concept of heteronormativity can be illustrated using two dichotomies (Ambjörnsson, 2006). The first one is the dichotomy of men and women companioned by all the expectations and things taken for granted that can be associated with men and women, respectively. The dichotomy of men and women also include the idea of their complementarity. For example that women's qualities are opposite and complementary to men's. The sometimes-anticipated complementarity can be seen as support of the idea of a dichotomy because it might seem natural that the two categories would purposefully add to each other's shortcomings. The second dichotomy deals with the separation of hetero- and homosexuality and the first dichotomy is a prerequisite in order for the second dichotomy to exist. These dichotomies are palpable in Euro-American society of today, but they are also undergoing a process of self-corrosion, according to Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990). The crisis of dichotomies opens up for a new epistemology, she argues, where a continuum of subject positions becomes possible. In the latter section called; *Victimized or with agency*, a hint of that new epistemology is given.

Heterosexual values and views are often taken for granted. The heterosexual values are hegemonic, and privilege of heterosexuals is anticipated. The hegemony is embodied in different ways. For example the hegemony can not only be seen as invectives indicating an inferior subject position, but also in how LGBT people are marginalized (King, 2004), anticipated only to exist in groups of others (Reimers, 2008) and sometimes hid as subject position (Rosenberg, 2002) or related to discursive elements involving troubles and issues (Martinsson, 2008), just to mention a few examples. For a deeper survey on these processes, please confer Lundin (2011).

Pharr (1997, 2000) stresses that heterosexism and its manifestations need to be studied within the context of institutions, as within the school setting, for example. The term heterosexism then refers to a more radical connotation than heteronormativity that can be seen as a prerequisite for heterosexism to exist. The heteronorm does, however, not only have impact on LGB people. One important example of the general impact of this norm are for example the various kind of insults, originating in the hierarchic power positions of for example homo- and heterosexuality seen in invectives such as dyke or faggot, that can be said to not only LGBT people but to anyone. Similarly, Ambjörnsson (2006) stresses that the heteronorm refers to society's values and expectations in different aspects, indicating not only sexuality, but also an expected construction of gender.

1.3. The heteronorm and the teachers

In this article it is taken for granted that teachers are raw models for students. It is also taken for granted that the adults in school, both by their diversity and by their work to counteract traditional gender patterns, contribute to fulfilling the mission expressed as diversity. However, it can be questioned if the school is yet the arena for this mission or if school is slightly behind. Eribon (2004) describes how a homosexual teacher constantly fears being insulted by the students and he suggests that the teaching profession could be one of the more difficult sectors of the workforce.

In educational settings certain behaviors and interests are assumed, whereas others are perceived as odd. King (2004) illustrates this as he describes school as a setting where sexuality does not seem to exist—students are regarded as sexually inexperienced, and teachers as sexually inactive. His conclusion refers to sexuality that comply with the hetero norm. Sexuality that does not comply with the norm, such as a homosexual teacher coming out, is at risk of standing out. Slesaransky-Poe and García (2009) suggest that this (already made) sexualisation of pedagogy is accomplished through heteronormative behavior. It seems important to challenge heteronormativity within the school environment and deepen our understanding of the heteronormative ideology.

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