

# Heteronormativity in education

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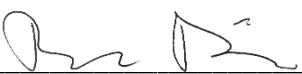
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I assure that I have written the present work independently. I have not used any sources other than those specified. I have not submitted the work or parts of it to an assessor for examination as an examination work either in Austria or abroad.



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## Abstract

*Educational institutions play a key role for the socialization of children. Within these institutions they do learn about social practices and norms. Heteronormativity is still omnipresent within these institutions. The challenges that arise out of this heteronormative education system are tremendous. Children still get bullied as gay or lesbian which leads to higher rates in exclusion, depression, self-harming and suicide for the persons concerned. The solution to this problem can only be found within the institutions itself. This text will look at three different instances within the educational institutions that have influence on the production and reproduction of heteronormativity: Teachers, the social peer group and teaching material.*

*Keywords: Heteronormativity, education, institutions, socialization*

## Educational institutions and the reproduction of heteronormativity

Within the last twenty years the term and concept of 'heteronormativity' has raised quite an awareness within the area of educational science. The term itself was first popularized by Michael Warner in 1991 in one of the first major works regarding queer theory [Warner 1991]. Warner's work is based on the early works of Gayle Rubin's around feminism, sex and gender (e.g. "sex/gender system"). According to David Bell the term 'Heteronormativity' is a combination of the terms 'heterosexuality' - which describes a certain sexual preference, the sexual preference towards the opposite sex (within a binary sex scheme) - and 'normativity' - which indicates a certain establishment of norm that is the standard within a particular society.

Beside its relevance for educational science and research the term heteronormativity can be found in different discussions around sexual research, gender studies and queer studies. Heteronormativity describes a special way of behavior and thinking or how David Bell put it: *"It [heteronormativity] describes the ways in which social institutions and forms of behavior reinforce – or indeed produce – belief that certain things are normal."* The 'normal' or standard in our society for sure is heterosexuality [Bell 2009].

In contrast to the norm of heterosexuality, or at least the norm to behave in a heterosexual way<sup>1</sup>, every other sexual preference or interaction is contrasted as not normal or even abnormal. That's the reason why heteronormativity is a tool to reinforce and justify the

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<sup>1</sup> People can behave in a heterosexual way, which basically means to interact sexually with the thought to be opposite sex, but still have homosexual desires that they suppress in their daily life.

normalness of heterosexuality by creating a sphere of certain assumptions, practices and beliefs within society. These assumptions, practices and beliefs are produced and reproduced in different social contexts. Bell identifies five different contexts that he calls 'spaces of heteronormativity': Home space, work space, social space, public space and nation space [Bell 2009: 2]. Within these spaces social practices including everything around sexual preferences and identity are produced and reproduced.

Children get socialized in different social contexts by different people and mediums. In the socialization of sexual identity, sexual desire and sexual behavior most of the narratives<sup>2</sup> kids are confronted with are heteronormative. Starting with the good night stories about 'the brave prince who seeks to save his princess' – which by the way is not only an expression of a heteronormative view on the world but a sexiest one as well – to the short stories and situations used in school books to teach languages, heteronormativity is omnipresent for children, especially in educational institutions.

As reported by a study conducted by the OECD in 2014, children in Austria spent in average around 32 hours per week<sup>3</sup> within institutions of primary and lower secondary education [OECD 2014]. This figure does only include the compulsory instruction time children spent at school. Breaks or voluntary activities like homework support or taking part in workshops are not counted. This shows that children spent a big part of their childhood within educational institutions. That's why these institutions have massive influence on the norms children learn and absorb into their social practices.

If they do not fit into the heteronormative picture several problems can arise. We have seen this in the past when children got bullied for being gay or lesbian. Actually, it's not even important whether this is true or not for the particular child. It only shows that not being heterosexual seems to be attackable, something that is bad and can be made fun of. These attacks can lead towards severe problematics like bullying, exclusion, self-harm, lowered self-assurance or even suicide [Plöderl 2015; Magnus/Lundin 2016]. Tackling the

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<sup>2</sup> Narratives in the sense of stories, images, heroes and standards that are presented to them.

<sup>3</sup> See T\_D1.1; Average hours per year; Add Columns: Compulsory instruction time for primary and lower secondary education; Divided by 25 weeks of compulsory instruction time (180 days per year) = 32 hours.

heteronormativity that is produced and reproduced within educational institutions therefore is an important issue to look at.

## The challenge for educational institutions

Different research in the past has shown that problems of equality in schools have their roots mainly in the non-reflected influence of heteronormativity [Magnus/Lundin 2016]. In addition, it seems not only to be a problem of not being reflective but in some cases even doing it by purpose. As educational institutions are in the spotlight of this discussion it's important to differentiate between various spaces of heteronormativity within the institutions.

Heteronormativity within educational institutions is mainly transported within three spaces: 1) By teachers and especially their use of language within classes. 2) By the interactions and dynamics within the immediate social peer group of the children which are mainly other pupils. And 3) Through the used teaching materials like books, working sheets, images, visualizations, films, etc.

For a better understanding of the challenges tackling heteronormativity in educational institutions it's necessary to take a closer look at these three spaces:

**1) Teachers:** As mentioned earlier children spent quite a big amount of their child and young adulthood within educational institutions. During this time, they do not only learn facts in different classes like History, Economics, German, Biology, etc. Furthermore, they do get socialized in the interaction with their classmates and teachers and learn about social practices and thereby absorb the undermatching norms.

Teachers are 'agents of knowledge'. On the one hand, they do present subject-specific facts and on the other hand they are role-models for the children. Their way of behaving is closely watched by the children as well as the language they use. As language has a special role in creating reality, setting and hardening norms teachers need to pay attention to their wording. The famous philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once put it like this: "*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*" [Wittgenstein 1918].

Children can get 'Othered'<sup>4</sup> by teachers saying things like "Ask your mom and dad" repeatedly. This short phrase seems to be harmless, but can cause quite some trouble for children. Through repetition, language does drive a heteronormative view on the world within the children. This little example shows that teachers need to understand how powerful their language is for children and pay more attention to it.

Beside language teachers do choose the teaching materials for their classes. As mentioned above this is another key space and we'll take a lot at it later.

**2) Social peer group:** The immediate social peer group does as well play an important role within the process of socialization in educational institutions and therefore for the reproduction of heteronormativity. One cause is that children do not only spent time in compulsory instruction classes during their time at educational institutions but they do also spend free time there. Within this free time, they do interact with each other. This can be in conversations, sport activities or learning groups. As most of the children bring a certain set of heteronormativity with them from home conversations will be directed by this. The topics that are legitimate to talk about are preset: Girls talk about boys and vice versa.

In addition, swearwords often include homophobic or you could say heteronormative accusations like "Faggot" or "That's so gay". Something is labeled as gay mostly in the context of something negative or weak. This way children learn to connect gay with something negative. At this point it's important to intervene and stop this process right before it really can start.

**3) Teaching material:** But not only the interactions are important to look at but also the materials used in the process of education. Teachers do have a major influence on this space. Primarily because they are the once who prepare or choose the teaching materials for their classes. Nevertheless, it's important to mention that beside self-made materials there is a tremendous amount of teaching material prepared and available which teachers do use. These materials often include a strict heteronormative view on the world.

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<sup>4</sup> Othering describes the efforts to distance or differentiate oneself from another group to confirm the own 'normalness'.

As Carina Sonnleitner did find out in her diploma thesis school books do include several stereotypes related to sex and gender. This does include heteronormativity and matching narratives. This does include relationships that are portrayed within school books. As she did find out non-heterosexual relationships are little to non-displayed in these books. So, the problem here is not that heterosexual relationships are displayed but that non-heterosexual relationships are not displayed [Sonnleitner 2013]. This has two effects: Once again heterosexuality gets normalized and non-heterosexuality gets implicitly displayed as something abnormal.

## **Humannormativity**

So, what can be done to overcome described problems with heteronormativity in educational institutions? To frame this issue right: Heteronormativity for sure is a problem of the society and not all problems can be solved within the educational institutions. But we need to start somewhere and to conquer the problem, it seems to be appropriate to focus on children and the way we raise and educate them.

At first, it's important to recognize that visibility is a key factor. To 'normalize' something that is currently seen as 'abnormal' it's important to bring it to the public by showing its existence. Referring to David Bells spaces of heteronormativity one of the biggest challenges will be to bring non-heteronormative narratives into the three spaces: Teachers, social peer group and teaching material. By doing so a process of change can start where step by step and in a dynamic process heteronormativity can be replaced by 'Humannormativity'.

Second it seems important to relocate resources into educational institutions in form of special trained methodologists, social workers or psychologists that work together with the teaching staff to ensure education free from heteronormativity for everyone. These people could also help children and classes that need help in overcoming preexisting stereotypes and social practices.

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