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Queer(ing) youth, schools, and the end of innocence. Problematizing understandings of non-heteronormative youth in schools

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GEXcel conference

Sexual Health, Embodiment and Empowerment: Bridging Epistemological Gaps

24-27 November 2009, Linköping

subtheme:

Sex education

Queer(ing) youth, schools, and the end of innocence. Problematizing understandings of non-heteronormative youth in schools

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Schools are spaces of continuous 'sex education', marking all participants in the process of learning and teaching in highly gendered, sexed and sexualized – and classed and ethnicized – ways. Thinking of education about gender-sex-sexuality merely as knowledge that needs to be transmitted to students in an often limited classroom setting fails to notice the deeply rooted notions of subjectivity and belonging that enable and disable specifically gendered, sexed and sexualized positions.

Transgression of gender-sex-sexuality norms, while tolerated to some extent as long as it is seen as 'rebellion', is severely punished when understood as serious negotiations of existing limitations. However, discourses of queer youth as victims underestimate both young people's agency, their role as co-producers of belongings and hierarchizations, and the societal relevance of their experiences. The issue at stake is much broader than voicing concern about minoritized youth. Limiting our understanding of 'youth' as either innocent and impressionable or as in danger or endangering underestimates the relevance of young people's negotiations of gender-sex-sexuality. Neither perspective challenges the fact that they are not full citizens. In a parallel, reading teachers' roles as mere transmitters of knowledge both restricts their choices and limits their responsibilities.

With this paper, I will queerly investigate notions of 'youth' written into school policy documents and reflected in academic discourses on sex education and gender-sex-sexuality in schools.

Biography

Irina Schmitt is an ethnographer with expertise in youth, migration and gender research and works as a post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for Gender Studies at

Lund University, Sweden. Her previous research includes an extensive project with young people in Germany and Canada on gendered and ethnicized self-positioning in specific migration societies. Her current interest is the role of gender-sex-sexuality in the constructions of 'national identities' among young people, with ongoing research on the role of sexuality school policies in Sweden, Germany and Canada. Publications include (2008): From 'Security Risk' to Charter Rights – Gender, Sexuality and the Canadian Politics of Integration. In: *Zeitschrift für Kanada-Studien* 1/2008; with Hoerder, Dirk/Yvonne Hébert (Eds.) (2005, 2006): *Negotiating Transcultural Lives: Belongings and Social Capital among Youth in Transnational Perspective*. Göttingen: V+R Unipress (North American edition: University of Toronto Press, 2006).