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Queering School, queers in school: An introduction

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Queer studies of education have become a growing field with a range of theoretical and political positions and methodological approaches. Moreover, research with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) kids is tightly connected to anti-homophobia, anti-transphobia and norm-critical activism. One of the key contentions within this field is what researchers and activists mean by “queer” in the context of education: is it a focus on queer/ed subjectivities? Is it about using queer theories to critique forms and norms of education in a given sociopolitical context? Who is queer/ed in schools? Is the language of homophobia and transphobia the best or even correct way to describe and analyse normative educational settings and frameworks?

The ways in which queer education activists and researchers address normative school settings vary, but many are driven by hope for survival and better times. Education researchers Susan Talburt and Mary Lou Rasmussen have opened up for a serious

evaluation of what they read as a “restorative agenda” in queer studies of education, questioning:

... the very repetitions we were struggling with: a relentless search for ‘agency’, a belief in pedagogical improvements to encourage diverse gendered and sexual subjectivities, and ideas of a future made better by new imaginings.¹

What Talburt and Rasmussen point out is the problems of a deep-rooted belief in change for the better that are based on the individual instead of on systemic changes. We learn from them to argue that such hopes for a future, which can take us towards experiences of education less pointedly marked by practices of exclusion, certainly require critical reflection and theoretical challenges. At the same time, we cannot do without those local interventions, albeit short-term, that are necessary just there, just then. One of the questions that remain is how we can build lasting conversations between these spaces. A participant in one of the editors’ studies challenged her to organise a conference “to bring us all together.” With this issue, we are attempting to be part of that conversation, and to pass on that challenge.

In this issue of *Confero*, we highlight both ethnographic investigations of queer and queered kids in school and critical views of school’s policy making and normative frameworks. Queer education research is a rapidly growing area of study. Where researchers and activists insist on the entanglements between not least sexual, gendered and racialised structural formations, we also insist on our expectation that principal values in schools meet the increasing challenges from queer activism and research.²

¹ Talburt and Rasmussen, 2010, pp. 2-3.

² Kusmashiro, 2001.

Reviewing previous studies in this field, it is notable that statistics show that queer/ed kids are at risk of harassment and violence,³ and experiencing an increased risk for depression, drug use and suicidality.⁴ Recent studies address both the experiences discussed and the logic of victimhood inscribed.⁵ In particular, several studies in North America discuss initiatives for creating safe schools or safe units within schools, with student support groups and the so-called gay-straight or queer-straight alliances as the most well-known and well documented.⁶ Although these studies suggest that the presence of a gay-straight alliance is associated with less homophobic harassment, little is known about the causality. Are these groups prohibiting homophobic and transphobic harassment, or is it a less homophobic and transphobic environment that is required for a gay-straight alliance to be initiated? Other researchers argue that such initiatives, while important respites, are not much more than “band-aids” in contexts that eschew more structural changes.⁷ Some call for other interventions to address heteronormativity and cisnormative cultures in schools, such as incorporating LGBTQ issues in teacher education⁸ or school counselling.⁹ An important intervention in this debate is to fundamentally question the logic of queer kids as victims – and therefore subjects – of homophobia and transphobia. Instead, it is necessary to analyse processes of subjectivation through heteronormativity and cisnormativity in the context of education in schools.¹⁰

³ Grossman, Haney, Edwards, Alessi, Ardon and Howell, 2009; Black and Gonzalez, 2012; Birkett, Espelage and Koeing, 2009; Blackburn and McCready, 2009.

⁴ Birkett et al., 2009.

⁵ Haskell and Butch, 2010.

⁶ Black et al., 2012; Fetner, Elafros, Bortolin and Drechsler, 2012; Heck, Lindquist, Stewart, Brennan and Cochran, 2013.

⁷ MacIntosh, 2007.

⁸ Greytak, Kosciw and Boesen, 2013; Kitchen and Bellini, 2012.

⁹ Goodrich and Luke, 2009.

¹⁰ Rasmussen, 2006.

Besides a core focus on safe school environments, several previous studies engage with LGBTQ issues in relation to sexuality education. According to many of these studies, sexuality education most often teaches compulsory heterosexuality,¹¹ sometimes, and typically for North America, with an absence-only-until-marriage mission,¹² or a one-sided focus on heterosexual experiences and prevention of STDs in heterosexual intercourse,¹³ leaving non-heterosexually identified pupils' experiences, questions and needs unspoken. Furthermore, research on school cultures, teacher education and school policy covers some of the questions queer education researchers address.¹⁴

A crucial node for intellectual work on queer education would be to work through conceptualisations both of childhood and youth, and of identity formation/subjectivation. It becomes more than obvious that queer education studies reach far beyond heteronormative perceptions in which LGBTQ-subjectivity is perceived as a minority.¹⁵

Our special issue

When initiating this special issue, we had a double aim: wanting to both address queer people's everyday experiences of school and to focus on the theorization of queerness in education. We have been fortunate to gather research(ers) and activist work that highlight a broad and deep range of queer perspectives on school. Taken together, the articles provide an overview of *how*

¹¹ Connell and Elliott, 2009.

¹² Elia and Eliason, 2010.

¹³ Formby, 2011.

¹⁴ Schmitt, 2012; Meiners and Quinn, 2012.

¹⁵ Bromseth and Darj, 2010; Røthing and Bang Svendsen, 2009.

heteronormativity permeates schools, from the abstract prescriptions of legislations, pedagogical methods, social edginess in classrooms or school yards, to self-conceited straightness in textbooks, manuals and implements. The origin of these articles are found in Australia, Canada, Slovenia, Sweden and the US. We wish to further engage in a discussion on the geopolitics of queer issues, without assuming that there is one recipe for dealing with heterosexual normativity, as has been earlier discussed in Jasbir Puar's critique of homonationalism.¹⁶ Indeed, the liberal idea of schools as a platform for life-long learning of tolerance, inclusion and anti-mobbing seems to resist the influences that queer and feminist theories have had both in research and in activism, which is discussed in several of the articles in this issue.¹⁷

In "*Taking homophobia's measure*," Australian researcher Mary Lou Rasmussen analyses manuals employed in sexuality education in Australian and US schools, where homophobia is presumed as a condition that can be measured on various scales. Rasmussen's exposition over various methods to handle homophobia indicates that they often pinpoint certain groups and classify archaic personality types. Following Rinaldo Walcott's argument that what we understand as 'homophobia' is still in question, Rasmussen queries these methods and the scientification of the scale as a model for measuring homophobia. Unlike many scholars who usually point out the problem but leave the tools of implementation to practitioners, Rasmussen suggests alternative ways of discussing LGBTQ in school.

The second contribution for this special issue also engages with text analysis. While Rasmussen focuses on scales where homosexuality is 'othered', Swedish researcher Malin Ah-King's

¹⁶ Puar, 2007.

¹⁷ Bromseth and Darj, 2010.

article, “*Queering animal sexual behavior in biology textbooks*,” draws on an analysis of how animal sexual behaviour is depicted in biology textbooks by showing texts where non-heterosexuality is systematically ignored. Given that any biology school textbook must simplify the richness of sexuality in nature, it is striking how the textbooks continue to show such simplification through the lenses of *human* heterosexual and gender norms. As Ah-King points out, biology gives us knowledge about nature and thus impacts on our ideas of what is ‘natural’. When non-heterosexuality is left unmentioned, the impression of its non-existence is easily given.

Similarly, invisibility of non-heterosexuality is central in the third contribution for this issue. Switching focus from text analysis to lived experiences, Slovenian researcher Ana Sobočan’s research on the situation in school for children with homosexual parents in Slovenia is built on a unique interview study. Since Slovenia joined the European Union as a member state, there has been new legislation recognising same sex relationships. However, according to Sobočan this has had limited impact on the level of hate speech, ignorance and defamation that queer people experience. In fact Sobočan notices, what she coins, “moral homophobes” who use the protection of children as an excuse to express homophobic attitudes. This fundamentalist view imposed on children reproduces the well-worn idea that LGBTQ people are incapable of transferring good values to children, which affects the political debate in Slovenia. Sobočan also discusses a generation gap between older and younger homosexual parents and that the younger generation is more active in claiming openness and education on LGBT-issues, what Sobočan calls a “denormalization”, and key to moving away from harassment and hatred.

Another piece that engages with lived experiences is US-American researcher Mel Freitag's article "*A queer geography of a school: Landscapes of safe(r) spaces.*" A US school, known by reputation as the "gay school" is the context for Freitag's ethnographic fieldwork. Drawing on the experiences of youth and staff in this school, she discusses notions of safety and safe spaces. Freitag discusses how queering a space can provide a safe(r) space, not only for queers themselves, but for straights as well. Despite the school's reputation, and the researcher's expectations, most of the pupils did not identify as LGBTQ. Rather, the school is described as an area where pupils are able to self-identify in a broad spectrum of sexuality and gender positions, or not self-identify their gender or sexuality at all. A safe(r) space seems to be a space where identities are not limited to a repertoire of alternatives that have been established beforehand; rather a much more fluid and dynamic lived experience is depicted. The safe(r) space is thereby providing a richness far beyond the fixed stages of "tolerating" or "celebrating" homosexuality, as in the homophobia measuring scales discussed by Rasmussen in this issue.

From the almost comforting feeling of following Freitag through the corridors of the so-called "gay school", the reader must be ready for an abrupt shift to take in the second US contribution, the position paper "*Safety for K-12 students: United States policy concerning LGBT student safety must provide inclusion.*" April Sanders departs from one of the most serious consequences of homophobia in schools, namely young queers' suicide following homophobic harassment. Sanders argues that US policy documents directing school organisation should and must address homophobic harassment. Statistics and examples of non-heterosexual youth being exposed to violence and harassment

due to homophobia is employed to show this alarming situation that demands necessary political and policy changes.

The final article in this issue shares with Sanders an activist point of departure. Rachel Epstein, Becky Idems and Adinne Schwartz are LGBTQ activists from Canada. Their contribution “*Queer spawn on school*” engages with school experiences of children with LGBTQ parents.¹⁸ The authors show how homophobia affects those who are culturally queer, i.e. those growing up with non-heterosexual parents, regardless of whether they are emotionally queer or not. It is a gloomy read to take part in children and teenagers’ experiences of being bullied. However, it is also encouraging to hear queer spawn speak up about their obstacles, within the context of research. During the late 20th century, children in non-heterosexual (mainly lesbian) families were the subjects of interest in several studies. Specific experiences of these children, or any deviation from other children and youth, were however most often played down in these early studies, partly because an overt focus on difficulties was seen as a risk in feeding homophobes with arguments against queer families. With Epstein, Idems and Schwartz’s text, queer spawn are able to speak in their own right, demonstrating a political and societal advancement of non-heterosexual families in Canada – and possibly encouraging further developments that are to come.

Working with this special edition has been an enormous pleasure for us. Thanks to the authors for their fierceness in activism and intellectual astuteness! We hope that the conversations in this issue can contribute to ongoing debates and challenges in education research and in schools.

¹⁸ For more on this subject, see Gustavson and Schmitt, 2011.

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