

The Big Silence in Bernese Public Schools

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I would like to devote this paper to Milène Hauri who gave the pivotal input to write this study

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Introduction

“Verbal abuse, isolation, teasing, physical assault, being ostracized and being subject to pressure to conform” (Vicars 2006: 347) these are the suffering experiences of many students identified as queer in schools. Developing queer sexuality in school and feeling attracted to the same sex is very problematic. Schools are the most important contexts of adolescence and, as such, schools should guarantee an environment of acceptance. According to the National School Climate Survey 2009 (NSCS 2009) which has been documenting the school experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth in the US, “schools nationwide are hostile environments for a distressing number of LGBT students — almost all of whom commonly hear homophobic remarks and face verbal and physical harassment and even physical assault because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.” (NSCS 2009: xv-xvi). Epstein, O’Flynn and Telford (2001: 129) even mention statistics showing “disproportionately high number of suicides among young queer people.” It is to be assumed that in Europe, the social climate concerning homosexuality is not very different. For instance, a study conducted in Berlin shows that 18 per cent of all queer respondents attempted suicide at least once. Furthermore, they reveal that queer youth suffer insults, violence and exclusion on a regular basis (Biechele et al. 2001: 1, 16-17). A qualitative study conducted by Gfeller (2006) in the canton of Bern indicates that Switzerland is not an exception. Some adolescents accepted their homosexuality but report not coming out in Bernese public schools because they feared discrimination (Gfeller 2006: p21). Others did not come out because despite knowing that they were “different,” they could not yet imagine they were homosexual.

The purpose of this study is to know what kind of policies exists in the canton of Bern in order to improve queer student’s daily life at schools and how those policies tackle bi-, homosexuality and other forms of sexual orientation.

The present paper is structured around two sections. In the first section, theoretical insights are discussed in order to understand the mechanisms of discrimination against queer students. In the same section, some approaches about including and teaching bi-, and homosexuality are also presented. The findings of the first part may also apply to other social groups that are targets of discrimination. The second section is divided in three parts: The first is about regional private policies that focus on public schools and that try to change its hostile climate against queer students. Only one organization is found whose coworkers visit schools in order to talk about sexual orientation to students. Thanks to the possibility to attend and record such a school visit, the manner

how bi- and homosexuality are described could be analyzed. This analysis is based on the theoretical inputs of the first part. The following part is about official policies addressing homosexuality at schools. Mainly, existing studies do directly focus on public schools, students and teachers, but they leave out an important institution that is the PHB, the institution that train and form students to become teachers. The aim is first to know what they do in order to prepare young teachers to bring up homosexuality up in class. Second, as it will be found out that there is not done much, by means of interviews of tutors, it is possible to understand why bi- and homosexuality and sexuality in general is a neglected subject at the PHB. In the third part of the second section, national policies are considered. The purpose here again is to understand what is done and in which manner other sexual orientations than heterosexuality are presented. In the concluding part, the most important lessons are revised and summarized.

Understanding the issue

This study focuses on homosexuality in schools. Schools are places where youth develop physically and emotionally (Landry, Singh and Darroch 2000: p212) Gfeller (2006: p20) points to the fact that sexual orientation is already developed in early childhood. Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford even argue that elementary school children are already knowledgeable about and interested in sexuality (Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2001: p135). Klein affirms that adolescents/children become conscious of their sexual affinity between ten and eleven for women and between nine and thirteen for men (Klein 2009: 7). So, school takes place when youth begin to be conscious about their sexuality. For homosexuals this has to do with the process of "Coming Out". This process is divided into two stages. First, an adolescent becomes aware of her or his feelings and desires for the same sex. This first step depends strongly on the level of information about the topic. Then, accepting these feelings depends on the social context as such schools that should guarantee an environment of acceptance. The second step means that adolescents begin to show their feelings and sexual preferences in public. For young homosexuals, whether this part occurs, also depends on context like school, family and friends (Gfeller 2006: 7-8). Depending in which context an adolescent grows up or goes to school, Coming Out can be very difficult. Queer students are afraid of the consequences they have to bear if they live their sexual orientation overtly at home and in school. In relation to that, the question arises, why and how queer sexual orientation is stigmatized.

Heteronormativity is a crucial theoretical concept that helps to explain the current situation at schools and in the whole society. What does this term mean? Heteronormativity refers to the fact that heterosexuality is seen in society as the norm and privileged praxis and style of life of individuals (Delege 2008: 88-89). "The assumption of heterosexuality as being normal, is a normative practice through which heterosexual standards and norms assumed to be superior are created and kept in place" (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh 2004: 152). Heteronormativity then is based on two assumptions: first, personhood is naturally based on heterosexuality that, second, is the essential basis without exceptions (Delege 2008: 88). Consequently, heterosexuality is a social fact that is not questioned and is held as self-evident (Delege 2008: 89). Heteronormativity is ubiquitous within most structures and institutions, including schools where heterosexuality is dominant and privileged (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh 2004: 152). However, individuals are not supposed to be conscious of it, as heteronormativity functions like a habitus, (Delege 2008: 89).

Temple (2005: 273) uses another term namely heterosexism that has nearly the same meaning as heteronormativity but it puts the emphasis on structural relations whereas heteronormativity points to what is the “appropriate” behavior in society. So, heterosexism puts the accent on the presumption that heterosexuality is superior to all other forms of sexuality and has thus a clear structural connotation. Temple (2005: 274) mentions schools as the major heterosexist institutions and that in such a system, straight minds are created that “cannot conceive of a culture, a society where heterosexuality would order not only all human relationships but also its very production of concepts and all the processes which escape consciousness, as well.” (Temple 2005: 274). What heteronormativity and heterosexism have in common is that they analyze critically relations of power which are established around heterosexuality (Jutta H. and Christian K. 2007: 11)

It is necessary to keep in mind that homo- and heterosexuality is not a natural fact but a modern social construction (Degele 2008: 84). Today, homosexuality is strongly connected to a homosexual identity which means that people do not only say that they act homosexually/heterosexually but that they *are* homosexual/heterosexual (Degele 2008: 86). In this context, sex is necessary to discover the “true” identity of an individual which corresponds to an understanding of identity as essentialist and unchanging (Wagenknecht 2007: 26) This common belief contrasts the idea that sexuality, here as a part of identity, is a fluid, complex, and changing ensemble of an individual’s sexual feelings, desires, and behaviors (Temple 2005: 278). In the logic of heteronormativity, however, sexuality is reduced to a binary system (straight or gay) which denies sexual individual plurality. Following Kumashiro (2002: 4), to admit one’s bisexuality or queerness is to acknowledge that sexuality is more fluid which troubles people’s own sexual identity. Mostly, people do not like that because “to think of sexuality as either/or often reflects a desire to stabilize and normalize a person’s own sexual identity” (Kumashiro 2002: 4).

Having mentioned identity it is also important to be clear about this concept. Identity is mostly constructed through boundaries, because one knows her- or himself better when she/he knows what she/he is not. Thus, heterosexuality needs homosexuality in order to construct itself as normal and to define what is not normal, namely the “Other” (all other sexual modes of living) (Loutzeheiser and MacIntosh 2004: 152). In order to define sexual identity, the concept of “Otherness” seems to be very important. The term of “Other” refers to those groups that are traditionally marginalized, denigrated, or violated in society as for instance queer youth in school (Kumashiro 2002: 32). By constructing “otherness”, relations of power and hierarchies are implemented (Degele 2008: 97) Differences between categories are used in order to exclude and to explain

social differences despite of a dominant ideology of equality. (Delege 2008: 95). Hence, differences are indicators of power relations (Delege 2008: 102) Thus, heterosexuality and homosexuality have to be thought of in a power relation where heterosexuality is the desirable and dominant while the "Other" is marginalized. This is consistent with a heteronormative order. The otherness of the queer body "is an attempt to control and assimilate, while simultaneously reifying the heterosexual body without ever having to question its heteronormative stability." (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh 2004: 152). Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford (2001: 152) also mention heterosexuality as strategy for keeping in place a hegemonic masculinity whose status is maintained through exercising power over women, homosexual men, and racially subordinated masculinities.

The violence in classroom against the "Other" (queer body) is often enacted through silencing (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh 2004: 152). Many studies show that homosexuality is a subject least discussed during sex education (Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2001: 142). This absence of discussion of sexual diversity, "tell queer youth that they are not worthy of inclusion, that they are and ought to remain invisible" (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh 2004: 155). Moreover, for students who do not identify themselves as queer may have issues related to same-sex attraction (Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2001: 145) making this omission even more problematic. What is not brought up and discussed by teachers "is often rendered visible and saturated with meaning outside the classroom, as queer bodies are named in high school hallways and cafeterias, or erased in popular epigrams such as, "Oh, that's so gay." Once labelled, the individual is socially and politically marginalized." (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh 2004: 152).

In such a hostile ambiance, students have some strategies in order to survive: passing, accommodating to a homophobic environment by contributing to it, heterosexual overcompensation, overachievement, and confrontation of oppression through resistance (Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2001: 148). Going to school for young queers is related to oppression and in some cases quitting school represents a great relief. (Epstein, O'Flynn, and Telford 2001: 147). Given different reaction of queer students to heterosexist order, the attribution of an individual to one of the socially constructed categories hetero-, homo- and bisexuality can shape the very way in which reality is experienced (Temple 2005: 274). The overemphasis of their sexual orientation lets disappear all other behaviors of the person. Thus, the individual is reduced to its sexual practices that are seen as the main determinant of its "true" identity.

Having discussed roughly the most important concepts necessary to advance the understanding of the mechanisms of discrimination of queer students, the next question is: What and how the situation in schools can be altered? In order to give an answer, it will be mainly relied on Kevin K. Kumashiro's (2002) approaches presented and

discussed in his book "Troubling Education." He mentions four more or less different manners how to bring up sexual orientation and to combat heterosexist thinking in schools. The first approach is that "schools need to be and provide helpful spaces for all students, especially for those students targeted by the forms of oppression." (Kumashiro 2002: 34) This is conceptualized on two levels. First, schools need to be places for students where the Other is not harmed verbally, physically, institutionally, or culturally. On the second level "schools need to provide separate spaces where students who face different forms of oppression can go for help, support, advocacy, resources and so forth." (Kumashiro 2002: 35) This also corresponds to Ryser's proposal for consulting structures in schools, an approach not pursued in Switzerland (Ryser 2005: 39). This approach has some weaknesses one of which is that it does focus on the Other and thus does not include the questioning of the privileging the "normal." (Kumashiro 2002: 37) The second approach is to integrate the Other throughout the curriculum, which means for instance that student are taught about queer history, literature written by queer authors, so forth (Kumashiro 2002: 41). Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh's (2004: 155) study promotes this approach by introducing queer citizenship into the curriculum. However, Hartmann (2007: 96) reminds that such inclusion also can contribute to reproduce hegemonic norms. Thus, it is important to think *how* marginalized minority are included.

In this sense, the third approach mentioned by Kumashiro (2002: 45-47) might be a solution. This method proposes teaching students about oppression rather than about the Other. In other words, students are introduced to how heterosexuality is presented as normal and implement itself as superior to all other forms of sexual orientation. In addition, students should also learn how to take action in order to transform structural oppression.

In order to understand the fourth method, it is necessary to acknowledge the problem of resistance, which means that he ascertains that "we resist antioppressive practices because they trouble how we think and feel not only about the Other but also ourselves." (Kumashiro 2002: 57) He continues that "we need to acknowledge that the desire to continue teaching the disciplines as they have traditionally been taught is a desire to maintain the privilege of certain identities, worldviews, and social relations. And [...] trying to "solve" the problem by adding differences can comply with oppression if we define differences in problematic ways and then add them to a framework where the same identities remain privileged." (Kumashiro 2002: 58)

Given that it is impossible to include all oppressed voices, the aim of antioppressive education is to transform the underling oppressive stories, for instance by including contradictory voices. Kumashiro (2002: 59) gives an example that is reproduced here:

“Rather than to perpetuate a story of the United States as a force of good [...] the unit can include voices in ways that teach about the U.S. perpetuation of racism and homophobia [...], and perhaps tell a story of how the United States acted in contradictory ways (Kumashiro 2002: 59). This is for history classes but for literature it might be possible to read texts in critical ways by asking which groups are missed or how difference is constructed in texts. Thus it is an approach that centers on critical questions, critical, reading against common sense and troubling official knowledge.

Antioppressive teaching involves then unlearning what we already have learned which may cause crisis. This means that teachers need to create space where students work through crisis because we do not often desire learning about our own complicity (Kumashiro 2002: 62). Ideally this should result in a changing attitude of students how they see themselves and the binary of normalcy/Otherness (Kumashiro 2002: 64). However, resistance should not be underestimated. Thus attention must be given to the fact that including queer issues in curriculum may be followed by a “culture of resistance” to dominant codes of civility, propriety, and respect (Faiman-Silva 2002: 200).

As antioppressive education is rarely approached in the sense of the fourth method, schools thus reinforce the wider society’s social norms and values and they strive to conform to the wider heteronormative social values and codes of conduct (Faiman-Silva 2002: 192).

Policies addressing Bi- and Homosexuality at Schools

Private Policies

Bernese schools do not have any policy to address the problems of queer students, but social policies can originate in private institution, not only in public institutions like schools. (Hill 2006: 7) This part is dedicated to private initiatives that exist in order to combat heterosexism in schools.

There are many private organizations like Aids Hilfe Bern, a regional section of Aids Hilfe Schweiz, that provides information about sexuality in general and also about bi- and homosexuality. Courses for teachers and adolescents are offered, but homosexuality is just a part of the topics brought up during such sessions¹. There are further organizations, but they only offer consultation. Examples are Rainbowline² that offers consultation in case someone is exposed to homophobic violence and discrimination, Dr. Gay³ or Medigay⁴.

Other queer association do not focus on queer youth and consultation but on political rights of all bi- and homosexuals or/and to build a location where bi- and homosexuals can meet up. Examples for that kind of organization are HAB (Homosexuelle Arbeitsgruppe Bern)⁵, Cominginn (Berner Jugendgruppe für schwule und bisexuelle Jungs)⁶, GLSBE (Gay and Lesbian Sport Bern)⁷, etc.

Among all these associations, the most important one, addressing homo- and bisexual issues in Bernese schools, is ABQ (Schulprojekt zur Thematisierung gleichgeschlechtlicher Liebe), which was founded in Bern in 1999. Their main policy is to visit classes personally on teacher's request. This visit lasts four lessons and should give adolescents the possibility to communicate directly with homosexuals. However, participation of students is not compulsory (Wiedmer 2009: 24-25). They also offer

¹ Aids Hilfe Bern Info und Beratung zu HIV und Sexualität, Haben Sie in Ihrem Berufsalltag mit Jugendlichen zu tun? <http://www.aids-be.ch/>, consulted: 07/05/11, 16:08

Aids Hilfe Bern Info und Beratung zu HIV und Sexualität, Schwierige Themen ansprechen, <http://www.aids-be.ch/>, consulted: 07/05/11, 16:11

² http://www.rainbowline.ch/neueSite/LesBiSchwulTrans_Beratung.html, consulted: 07/05/11, 16:30

³ <http://www.drgay.ch/d/>, consulted : 07/05/11, 16 :32

⁴ <http://www.medigay.ch/default.asp?m=64>, consulted : 07/05/11, 16 :34

⁵ <http://ha-bern.ch/angebot>, consulted 07/05/11, 16 :17

⁶ http://cominginn.ch/ueber_uns/wer_wir_sind, consulted : 07/05/11, 16 :21

⁷ <http://www.glsbe.ch/de/verein/start.asp>, consulted : 07/05/11, 16 :24

courses for teacher in order to help them learn how to deal with homosexuality in class. ABQ, then, provides also advice and prospects, information, and other publications.⁸

The four lessons are centered on five topics. The first theme is about the sensitization to marginalized groups. The second lesson covers the clarification of concepts and terms such as homosexuality, lesbianism, transgender and so forth and the legal situation of homosexuals. The third element of every visit is the main part where a man and a woman tell the student about their experience as homosexuals and Coming Out. The fourth part is about the construction of gender roles. During the fifth part, adolescents have to imagine a friend would come out as queer and what kind of effect this would have on students (Wiedmer 2009: 24-25) In the following paragraphs give full particulars about the content of such an intervention.

In order to have a clear idea about this content, it was possible to observe an intervention at Bernese public school. The aim is to analyze how the ABQ-team presents homosexuality. Do they challenge the underlining heteronormative story about homosexuality in the sense of Kumashiro (2002: 59, 62) who requires to complicate its own view on oneself by showing up contradiction, asking critical questions, and interpreting things against common sense?

The intervention was structured as follows: First of all, the ABQ-group starts to play a game with the whole class in order to loosen up the situation. The rules of the game are simple: The classroom is divided into two halves, one of the half is named "yes" the other is named "no", the ABQ-group asks some questions, like "do you have blue eyes?" "Have you ever lied?" etc. Students have then to move to the half named with the correct answer. After this game, students sit down in a circle in the middle of the classroom with the ABQ-group. This is the moment when they present each other. Everybody, including ABQ-adherents, say what they like to do during their leisure time and what love means to them.

In a second step, students have to write down everything they relate to homosexuality on a paper placed in the middle of the circle. One of the ABQ-team gives an example: "lesbians have short hair." After some minutes the group discusses what students have written down. It is expected to discuss prejudices (mostly coming from TV), fears and questions about homosexuality. During this part, they also explain terms like bi- and homosexuality and signs like the gay-flag etc. Furthermore, they also talk about the legal situation of homosexuals in Switzerland and in other countries. After these discussions and explications, one of the ABQ-group tells his Coming Out story, showing also pictures of his family and friends. Then cards are handed out to students. On each card an action is described (kissing, shaking hands etc.) and students have to arrange these cards

⁸ <http://www.abq.ch/index.html> consulted: 05/05/2011, 09:44

between “hot” meaning that these actions are only for couples and “cold” meaning that these actions are for friends. After ordering the cards, students have to put a lace where they think is the border between “hot” and “cold”. The lace is put twice once for two girls making those actions and once for boys. The different location of the border (lace) when changing the sexes are then discussed in class and related to social norms. This is followed by the next Coming Out story of the female activist. After discussion of her experiences, the ABQ-group distributes a questionnaire asking how they would react and feel if their best friend would be homosexual. Students have enough time to think about reasons and how this would influence the friendship. Students have time to write down their reaction. Then the different answers are discussed in group. After this discussion in class, the ABQ-team hands out again empty notes on which students may write down anonymous questions which are answered and discussed again. For the last part, the class was divided and each group of students had to mimic and present to all others their interpretation of a situation of Coming Out in a family. In each group the roles were mother, father, brother/sister and the girl/boy who wants to do her/his Coming Out.

By organizing such interventions, the ABQ-team hopes to increase tolerance and acceptance for homosexuals in schools. So they do not go to school just for bi- and homosexual students but for everybody in class. The fact that the ABQ-adherents are visitors already is a very difficult starting position because somehow they are othered twice: First they are homosexual and second they come from outside the school bringing an external view on sexuality which is not necessarily adopted to their normal base of knowledge that is dominated by family and school.

During the intervention the message of ABQ for students is that queer people are normal like everybody else. They transfer this lesson through two methods: First, by showing how “normal” they actually are, for instance, by presenting their leisure activities, their understanding of love, their childhood and their family, second, by discussing stereotypes, prejudices, and fears of students concerning homosexuality. For instance, when students had to imagine that their best friend were homosexual, they expressed concerns about the possibility that she or he could fall in love with them. The answer to that was that “it is not very different if a boy falls in love with a girl who happens to be his best friend. In such a case it is necessary to say that you cannot respond to these feelings.” Another example is that when they talked about prejudices on TV, one of the ABQ-group said that “you can recognize it (if someone is homosexual or not) more or less, but what you can see on TV is mostly exaggerated and does not correspond to reality.” A further example is when they talked about how homosexuals have sex. They underlined that anal intercourse is not only a practice among homosexuals but also

among heterosexuals. This effort to reduce difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals becomes very clear when they focused on sexual practices during discussion and when suddenly one of the ABQ-team intervened mentioning that “sex is just a part of the relation as it is for heterosexual couples. There are other things like trust and loyalty which is quite the same as for heterosexuals.”

Now the question is by saying bi- and homosexuals are as normal as heterosexuals, do they really succeed in questioning critically difference and thus hegemonic norms about sexuality as proposed by Hartmann (2007) and Kumashiro (2002)? During the whole intervention the dominant separation is not abolished. Everybody, including the ABQ-adherents, reasoned in fixed categories of sexual identity. By presenting their Coming Out story they present the fact that they had to find out and to learn to live with their real, essentialist homosexual identity. In this way homosexuality is already built as a fixed category. At several other moments the idea of separated groups (homosexual vs. heterosexual) emerges saying, for instance: “We live in a heterosexual society and it is difficult to admit to feel homosexually and to say that I belong to the other five percent of the society.” Furthermore the problem with the coming out story is that they show how they either try to hide their homosexual feelings in public or disavow them. But they do not question why they had to hide these feelings and why their environment had much more problems with homosexuality as they had. They miss to think critically about their own Coming Out. Why was it necessary to come out? Why heterosexual are not required to come out too? These are just some of the critical questioned that could be taken up for discussion with students.

Because of not questioning and criticizing Coming Out and heteronormative society, there is a tendency of the storytellers to represent her- or himself as a victim of their environment. In this manner they not only reproduce difference but also the oppression of “homosexuals”. The risk of victimization means that suffering of discrimination might be overemphasized. This only articulates the hegemonic imagination of a discriminated minority. Thus, it reproduces heteronormative order (Hartmann 2007: 111). That the Coming Out stories have a happy ending for both ABQ-storytellers does not alter the picture of homosexuality as a discriminated category because first they feel obliged to come out and seeking for tolerance for their sexual behavior and second they still are depending of the goodwill of the mainly heterosexual social environment. The reproducing effect of heteronormative order could be changed if they challenged the necessity of Coming Out or if they would question their social surrounding more deeply. However, this does not happen, on the contrary it is said: “Coming Out is not a finished process, you *have to* do it all your life” taking for granted that only homosexuals are supposed to come out. In spite of that, it must be emphasized that there is just a

tendency of victimization. Tendency, because the fact that the storytellers mention their happy childhood and ending of their Coming Out let their story appear nicer although, as explained above, it does not change the oppressive underlining story.

By fighting against stereotypes, talking about homosexuality in the sense of fixed categories and victimizing homosexuals, it is not possible to challenge dominant norms. Thus, if intended or not, the intervention puts the emphasis such that the underling heteronormative story about homosexuality is not transformed. But there were many chances to do so. The ABQ-intervention showed a big potential in order to complicate sexual identity, categories and common sense and to be critical. For instance when the first ABQ-adherent told his Coming Out story he said that he felt in love with a girl although he did not feel attracted to women. This experience represents a formidable tab in order to complicate sexual identity in discussion with students in the sense of Temple (2005) and Kumashiro (2002). There were other, similar moments, when they made the card-exercise (ordering different actions from “hot” to “cold”). The following discussion would have been also a possibility to complicate sexual identity of students. They discussed why two men cannot kiss each other on the cheek. And male students began to talk about themselves saying that they could not imagine kissing their same sex friend. This moment could have been used to go further complicate sexuality. At the same moment one of the ABQ-team even tried to explain the issue about dominant norms in society: “The reason (why it is not possible to imagine that two men kiss each other without necessarily being queer) is because of dominant norms in a culture which can change over time.” Yet, this explanation was then not used to further critical thinking about dominant heteronormative society.

Concerning Coming Out too, there was also the possibility of being critical about it when ABQ-worker said: “I do not like to out myself all the time because I do not want to be reduced to my homosexuality.” Or in the first Coming Out story the ABQ-activist said that he never had problems with his sexual orientation but that its social context (school) had a problem with it. Another moment happened to be in the last part of the intervention, when one student had to play the role of a homosexual girl or boy. Though, the short experience of the student performing the role of a “homosexual” was then not used to discuss her or his thoughts and feelings.

Overall, it can be said that the idea to visit schools and to build up direct communication between people who identify themselves as homosexual and students is an interesting approach. ABQ tries to show direct personal experience with Coming Out, how it really happens. But, the story tellers do not challenge and complicate dominant patterns of thinking during their stories. So the result is very ambiguous and somehow reproducing

common sense by presuming fixed sexual identities and without questioning the “normalcy” of heterosexuality.

However it has to be added that thanks to the intervention, it is possible that students who happen to consider themselves as bi- or homosexual, learn about their sexual orientation and thus may build up more self-confidence. But, the aim of changing attitudes towards homosexuality in schools is almost too ambitious because another important problem with this kind of intervention is even risen by Wiedmer himself, namely that there is no continuity of contact (Wiedmer 2009: 53). Given the shortness of the intervention, it is impossible to shape classes in the sense of the approaches of Kumashiro (2002).

Loutzenheiser and McIntosh (2004: 155) write that “it is not to say that these introductory moves are not important, but they have unintended and limited results.” The findings of Wiedmer (2009) are consistent with these considerations because he also says that effects of ABQ-interventions are ambiguous (Wiedmer 2009: 39-42). For instance, he found out that ABQ- interventions are not able to diminish stereotypes (Wiedmer 2009: 41-42). He even has to ascertain a negative effect on students, in the sense that tolerance and positive attitude towards homosexuals among students have worsened. This reaction following the intervention corresponds fairly well to what Faiman-Silva (2002) calls “culture of resistance”, that means that the transmitted norms of tolerance and respect encounter a mainly heteronormative background of students. In order to deal with this, much more is needed than a short intervention. Another problem is that ABQ is not very known among teachers only a very small minority has heard about it although most teachers would accept an external offer (Wyrsh 2001: 51-52).

Official Policies

Consistently with the theory, Gfeller in her conclusion sees several reasons that are responsible for the problematic situation described in the introduction. One major reason is that at Bernese schools homosexuality is not discussed by teachers even though it is included in the curriculum of the cantonal department of education⁹ (Gfeller 2006: 28-30) and although a large majority of teachers think that it should be discussed in classes (Klein 2009: 22). These silences correspond to what Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh (2004: 155) refer as missing discourse which should draw teacher's attention in. Teachers have discretion about how they want to design classes. Clarification on homosexuality, if it is mentioned in classes, can consist of a short definition or reference to some brochure (Gfeller 2006: p23). In a quantitative study, Wyrsh (2001: 46) asked teachers in the canton of Bern whether they once discussed these themes about homosexuality and bisexuality. More than sixty percent of all questioned teachers stated no.

One reason may be that teachers are not sufficiently trained so they feel unable to deal with the topic. (Gfeller 2006: p23, p29-30). Wyrsh confirms this, saying that teachers do not feel able to talk about this issue and that fewer than 15% of 207 teachers in Bern had any training (Wyrsh 2001: 49). Additionally, 69.6% of 207 teachers in Bern stated that there is no information at their schools about homo- or/and bisexual youth groups (Wyrsh 2001: 52). However, another study by Klein (2009) revealed that teachers are quite well informed about homosexual adolescents and largely agree it should be brought up in class (Klein 2009: p21-p22, p29). Yet, Wyrsh shows that their knowledge does not come from their training as teacher but depends on TV, books and personal experience (Wyrsh 2001: 49).

This study strives to understand how the education of teachers prepares them to bring bi- and homosexuality up in classes. In the canton of Bern, the PHB (Pädagogische Hochschule Bern) is responsible for the education of new teachers.

The PHB covers several institutes. The institutes of interest for the present paper are the institute of primary school and kindergarten (Primarstufe und Kindergarten), the institute of secondary school I (Sekundarstufe I). Both institutes form teachers for classes with students who should get sexual education in the period between fifth and

⁹ Lehrplan für die Volksschule des Kantons Bern 1995,
<http://www.faechnet.ch/6/7/12/26/210/211.asp>, consulted 06/05/11, 19:15

ninth year of school¹⁰. When the ABQ-team was asked, they think that the PHB is the base in order to improve the situation of queer students, to promote education about sexual orientation and to fill the silences in classroom. In the following paragraphs, it will be presented how bi- and homosexuality is brought up in each of the institutes and how the current situation is as it is.

Concerning the institute of secondary school, it is divided into six sections from which the section of educational- and socio-scientific studies teaches issues like sexuality. Thanks to an interview with the responsible of this sector, it has been possible to be very clear about the actual situation. At the moment there are no courses about sexual education in general. There are two compulsory courses, "Gesundheit von Lehrenden und Lernenden" and "Entwicklungsaspekte der Adoleszenz" that include some lessons about sexuality. In the first course, students have four hours about sexuality (including issues about sexual orientation) and in the second course three hours. During these lessons they learn about sexual orientation in form of role games but also through a large transfer of knowledge about sexuality.

For him, it is clear that seven lessons in the whole bachelor about sexual orientation and sexuality are too little. So there is the will to change that for the coming curriculum so that there are more lessons available for sexual education. But he does not think that it will be realistic to create an entire compulsory course about sexuality. Yet, there is still the possibility to create a not compulsory course.

The decision about such things is made in the directorate of the institute which is constituted by the leader of the institute and the persons in charge of the six sectors. The process of decision is democratic and restricted, for instance, by cantonal specifications. The problem is that when the sexual education should get more lessons or even a course, then lessons about other topics have to be reduced or left. He describes the same trade-off for teachers. They have to teach so many things to children so that they have to put priorities in favor of contents like mathematics, German, chemistry etc.

He also points to the responsibility of students at the PHB. If they wish, they can avoid the few lessons about sexuality because they have entitlements on two absences which some students use exclusively for these lessons about sex education.

Given the few hours reserved for sexuality and sexual orientation, the topic is completely underemphasized. What the interview has shown is that institutions like schools and PHB are the mirror of society. As the directorate of the institute has to respect official cantonal guidelines, the decision about a course about sexual orientation, is totally political. It depends from the societal and political context in which the PHB is

¹⁰ Lehrplan für die Volksschule des Kantons Bern 1995,
<http://www.faechnet.ch/6/7/12/26/210/211.asp>, consulted 06/05/11, 19:15

located. If there was more pressure from politics, officials, and media then the directorate of the institute would have to accord more lessons or even a compulsory course to sexual orientation. This again points to the beliefs of the heteronormative order in which we all live.

Concerning the institute for primary school and kindergarten, the tutor who was interviewed also happened to be the cofounder of ABQ. She said that the bachelor of primary school and kindergarten offers only two lessons about sexuality. These two lessons do not only include sexual orientation but all other topics related to it. It can be ascertained that sexuality in general and sexual orientation are not covered sufficiently although it is known children begin to think about sexual orientation at the end of primary school. She recognizes that an early sex education is a basis for a healthy sexuality in the age of adult. Thus, it would be important to teach future teachers how they should bring it up in class.

She explains that sexual behavior is not something steady and it is actually known for longtime that it is more complex than common sense prescribes. If a man has had sexual relations only with women, does not mean that he is not homosexual and on the contrary, if a woman kisses another woman, does not mean that she is homosexual. Of such things, adolescents should not be afraid and there is no necessity to be sure about sexual orientation. So to teach all these things to young teachers within two lessons is somehow impossible, she confirms.

For the near future, they plan to offer a not compulsory course about sexuality, like in the institute for secondary school. However she underlines that sexuality and more specifically homosexuality could already be a topic in several other courses like developmental psychology or discrimination. The problem of inclusion is that you also have to acknowledge particularities of sexual orientation like the social taboos, or fears of adolescents to become homosexual etc.

Yet, it depends on tutors whether sexual orientation is included or not. In general, tutors at the institute have a lot of discretion about curriculum: "We decide as a council what kind of courses we have and how they are called. It is in our competency." Thus, in order to create a course about, say, sexual orientation, it depends on how important sexual orientation is for tutors at the institute. There are some inputs of the PHB guidelines but they are very general and thus let much space for interpretation. So, the process of decision seems to be political; tutors clarify what competencies teacher need, then, on the basis of that, they decide what courses they want to offer. In this process tutors have to justify and convince others for their proposals.

She would support a compulsory course about sexuality but not one only about sexual orientation. She also doubts the effectiveness of such a course because much depends on

students and young teachers how they want to include sexual orientation in daily teaching practices. The other problem is that if a student is not interested in sexuality or sexual orientation because of religious beliefs or other reasons, “you can offer 10 lessons about this topic, it would be useless.”

She is also convinced that the most effective way to really promote sexual orientation as a topic in school is, when homosexual teachers would dare to out themselves. She thinks that today it is no more a reason of dismissal and every professional school would support homosexual teachers against critics

On the basis of these short insights into these two institutes, some concluding points can be made. First, sexuality, including sexual orientation is completely neglected, which corresponds well to the silence described by Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh (2004). Second in both institutes tutors are very autonomous and free on what courses they want to offer and how intensively they wish to emphasize certain topics. Third, what is seen as important and what not is a political decision that is made inside the institute but which links them also to the outside (politics, personal interests, inputs from PHB guidelines and cantonal specifications). Forth, the influence of the education of teachers is also limited which points to the responsibility of every teacher how he wishes or not to bring up sexual orientation.

National Policies

Until now, only cantonal policies have been considered, but there may be national policies focusing on homosexuality in secondary schools which also have an impact on the canton of Bern.

The Kompetenzzentrum für Sexualpädagogik und Schule (KSS) is an institution based on the national program on HIV/Aids 2004-2010. It aims to promote better sexual education by instructing teachers and setting minimal standards¹¹. Although they do not focus on homosexuality or homophobia but on sexual diseases and sexual education in general, their findings about sexual education in 2007 are relevant. They state that, generally, teachers are not or not sufficiently prepared to handle sexuality in classes and that free courses about sexuality are not frequented¹². Thus, if teacher training does not guarantee a good sexual education, how is it then possible to improve information about homosexuality at schools? The Kompetenzzentrum represents also a platform of exchange where information about what is going on in other regions is collected. For instance, it publishes information about homosexuality and indicates links where more information might be found. To give an example, teachers may find on the website of KSS reports about homophobia and anti-homophobia policies conducted in other cantons than Bern. It is also possible to find international minimal standards of sexual education¹³.

The importance of this national policy becomes clearer, when we look at the influence it may have in the process of decision about courses at the institutes of PHB. For instance, when interviewing the tutor from the institute of primary school and kindergarten, although tutors have a lot of freedom on how they want to design curriculum the headmaster of the institute proposed to give more attention to sexuality referring to KSS. Additionally, it also proposes curriculum for schools that includes better sexuality and sexual orientation. In this way, this policy can have an empowering effect on those topics and makes that tutors have to acknowledge it or perceive it as more important in comparison to other topics.

However it should be questioned why this KSS is mainly promoted by the BAG (ministry of health) and not by the ministry of internal affairs that is responsible for education and science? The BAG's mission in this area is to diminish sexual diseases; consequently it brings sexuality and mainly homosexuality (because of higher rates of AIDS- and HIV-

¹¹ <http://www.amorix.ch/kompetenzzentrum/auftrag/>, consulted: 11/03/11, 17:34

¹² http://www.bildungundgesundheit.ch/dyn/bin/87023-87027-1-situationsanalyse_sexualp_dagogik_und_schule_definitive_fassung.pdf, p20, 11/03/11, 20:06

¹³ <http://www.amorix.ch/grundlagen/international/#c11073>, consulted 10/05/2011, 09:19

infection) in relation with those sexual diseases. This is not to say that prevention and education programs about AIDS are not valuable, on the contrary. But for society and especially for young students who are not sure about their sexual orientation, it gives a mainly negative picture of homosexuality, one related to disease and death which scare people. Such an image does not tell a story of also happy experiences with a homosexual style of life.

Additionally the BAG believes in a homosexual identity by dividing the population in homosexuals, men/women that act homosexually and heterosexuals. Thus it tries to reach exclusively the first two groups although, given that individual sexuality is fluid and not necessarily fixed, potentially everybody could have homosexual practices. (Redaktionsteam BAG 2010: 18-19)

There are also private organizations on the national level from which one is similar to ABQ interventions and is named GLL (gleichgeschlechtliche Liebe leben). They make interventions to educate students about bi- and homosexuality during three lessons¹⁴. Additionally they provide teachers with information about this topic. Given the limited space of this work, it is not possible to make a deep analysis of this program. However, already on the page where they explain what they are and what they want to do during the intervention, it does not seem that they question dominant norms. It even gives the impression that they help to construct homosexuals as the Other, when they write¹⁵: “eine sachliche Einführung zum Thema Anderssein und Homosexualität”¹⁶. Yet, it could be that the title is fallacious.

Fels (Freunde und Freundinnen, Eltern von Lesben und Schwulen) is an organization that unites parents and friends of homosexuals¹⁷. Among other activities they help GLL with their interventions at Schools and promote the distribution of teaching materials about homosexuality¹⁸. As this organization brings heterosexuals and homosexuals together, it helps in some sense to overcome boundaries between heterosexuals and homosexuals and, thus, does not put queers in a marginalized Other. However, little can be said about their interventions at schools.

Then the two major queer associations in Switzerland, LOS (Lesbische Organisation Schweiz) and PinkCross. They work together with GLL, ABQ and Fels in order to provide schools and students with information about Bi- and homosexuality. They redesign

¹⁴ <http://gll.ch/index.php?index=6>, consulted: 10/05/11, 09:57

¹⁵ <http://gll.ch/index.php?index=2>, consulted : 10/05/11, 10 :02

¹⁶ „an objective introduction to the topic of being different and homosexuality“

¹⁷ <http://www.fels-eltern.ch/uberunsindex.html>, consulted: 10/05/11, 10:12

¹⁸ <http://www.fels-eltern.ch/tätigkeitsprogramm.pdf>, consulted : 10/05/11, 10 :14

curriculum as a proposition for schools, they make lobbying in the educational sector and they analyse and create teaching materials¹⁹.

¹⁹ http://www.pinkcross.ch/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=30&Itemid=162, consulted : 10/05/11, 10 :40

Conclusion

Concerning the right on sexual education, the report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right of education (2010) states in paragraph 23 that “in order to be comprehensive, sexual education must pay special attention to diversity, since everyone has the right to deal with his or her own sexuality without being discriminated against on grounds of sexual orientation or gender identity. Sexual education is a basic tool for ending discrimination against persons of diverse sexual orientations. A very important contribution to thinking in this area was made by the 2006 Yogyakarta Principles on the application of international human rights law in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity. The Special Rapporteur fully endorses the precepts of Principle 16, referring specifically to the right to education.” The Yogyakarta (2007: 21) principle 16 says that “everyone has the right to education, without discrimination on the basis of, and taking into account, their sexual orientation and gender identity.”

As we have seen, by silencing sexual diversity in Bernese public schools, the right on sexual education for queer students is not guaranteed. Thus, they are places which reproduce heteronormative society from which adolescents identifying themselves as queer. It is not only a concern for “homosexual students” but it has also a lot to do with how bi-, homo-, and heterosexual think of their own sexual orientation. From this point of view, the right of every student (may she or he be bi-, homo-, or heterosexual) is violated.

The aim of the study has been to know what kind of policies exists in the canton of Bern addressing discrimination of queer students. In the case of ABQ, an additional purpose has been to understand how bi- and homosexuality is brought up. Given the limited time, the impact of ABQ is somehow very limited in changing societal attitudes. But it represents a useful source of information for students that happen to identify themselves as queer.

In the case of the PHB, a further goal has been to understand the production of the current situation regarding bi- and homosexuality at its two institutes. The PHB, as a part of the State and thus addressed by the principles of Yogyakarta, does not contribute as much as they could in order to change the actual situation. Both interview partners stated that there will be done more in future which also means that institutes could have done more in the past, given the discretion of tutors about courses and its contents. The present situation, namely the few lessons about sexual orientation, can be seen as a short whisper in a big space of silence about sexual orientation.

In the case of the PHB, national policies had an empowering effect for sexual orientation which means as there is a national organisation especially devoted to sexual education it let appear the topic more important and thus rises up in the latter of priority of tutors and teachers.

In the section about national policies, the purpose has been to show what other policies about bi- and homosexuality exist outside of the canton Bern that also has an impact on its educational system.

After this overview the question is still in the room: What can be done? One problem has been that teachers do not feel able to bring up bi- and homosexuality. Thus a solution would be that schools employ teacher whose only task is to teach sex education during a semester or year on a regular basis. But, as the interview partner of the institute of primary school and kindergarten said: "it is impossible to teach adolescents that homosexuality is okay when they already have learned all the negative connotations (about it)." Given the approach of Kumashiro (2002) to unlearn these patterns would be quiet too demanding for young teachers, a good solution would be that the topic should already be part in the kindergarten, for instance, by presenting a children's book that shows same sex relationships. It must somehow become natural and normal for kids.

Society has several ways to influence curriculum of the PHB and of the schools in general, for instance through political guidelines but also through tutor's and teacher's priorities. As they are part of a heteronormative society, they also put priorities in a heteronormative way, or in way that corresponds to the culture of society. Thus, in order to change these attitudes and to make sexual orientation more important as a topic for student at the PHB and schools, action is required. This also points to the responsibility of those who identify themselves as bi- or homosexuals or who already have had homosexual experiences in their life. It is necessary that they do not hide their preferences or their experiences. In this perspective, the activities of ABQ are very important as some young activists talk overtly about their sexual orientation, although the effect of ABQ's intervention on students is ambiguous, given the dominant taboo in society. But there are many other queer associations and it would be important to coordinate these capacities in order to empowering the topic of sexual orientation

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