

Between LGBTTIQ-support and heteronormativity: Constructions of normality inside a school LGBTTIQ-support project in Germany

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1. ***Between LGBTTIQ-support and heteronormativity: Constructions of normality inside a school LGBTTIQ-support project in Germany***

Abstract:

How does heteronormativity become visible within the discourse of LGBTTIQ-support activists at the school? Using data from non-moderated group discussions among schoolchildren aged between 14 and 18, who were involved in LGBTTIQ support projects in different schools within the German Federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia, the article reconstructs how concepts of norms and normality, heteronormativity, difference and otherness are being articulated by the students. A sequential analysis of the group discussions is used to detect the meaning of norms and normality with respect to LGBTTIQ identities, to highlight the way in which LGBTTIQ-supporters are constantly being subjected to this discourse. Simultaneously it detects a concealed conflict between the goal setting of LGBTTIQ support and heteronormative discourse. The paper underlines the mechanisms of problematizing LGBTTIQ-identities by students and framing them as non-normality, thus showing the power of heteronormative discourse, the very discourse young LGBTTIQ-supporters are trapped in and trying to cope with.

Keywords: school support for LGBTTIQ; schooling; heteronormativity; norms and normalization

1. Introduction

By being involved in a school LGBTTIQ-support project called “School for Diversity,” school students are both provided with knowledge about LGBTTIQ-identities¹ and confronted with discrimination and exclusion of LGBTTIQ-persons in the history and in present. As part of the project, they are called upon to provide a better school environment for fellow LGBTTIQ-students. At the same time they are operating within a heteronormative discourse, one which seems to shape their own framing of norms and normality (see Schröter & Zimenkova 2019).

The German anti-discrimination network “Schule der Vielfalt” (“School of Diversity”²) aims at fostering awareness of homo- and trans*phobia and ultimately acceptance of LGBTTIQ-persons in school environments. The network supports the work done within the school projects through further training and education, providing school materials and organizing obligatory networking events.

The network was founded in Federal State of North Rhine-Westphalia in 2008. It is a collaborative project of the LGBTTIQ advisory institutions “rubicon” (Cologne), “Rosa Strippe” (Bochum), the volunteer project SCHLAU and the Ministry for School and Education NRW. The project served as a role model and soon developed into a wider network. Up until now, there is a contact person in 14 out of 16 Federal States, who helps to establish the “School of Diversity” (see Black, Fedewa, & Gonzalez (2012) for a literature review on programs for sexual minorities in schools).

¹ For this article we are choosing to work with the LGBTTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer) abbreviation, although the empirical data we work with articulates four identities only: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual. We believe bringing awareness to the multiplicity of sexualities and gender identities by using a longer abbreviation is useful to reflect both visible and invisible identities, especially to the members of the group discussions.

² Homepage of the network: <http://www.schule-der-vielfalt.de/> retrieved on April 23, 2018

In this article we seek to demonstrate how heteronormativity and norms are constructed by the students involved in school-project LGBTTIQ-support work, how concepts of norms and normality are being articulated by these students. We seek to understand how exclusion, otherness and norm as concepts are perceived and formed by school activists and how the meaning of norms and normality used by LGBTTIQ-supporters can be identified.

2. Heteronormativity and its construction: Literature review and research question

Much has been said about “doing gender” (starting with Garfinkel, 1967 and Goffman, 1977/1979, and elaborated by scholars of heteronormativity like Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Fenstermaker, West & Zimmerman, 2002). For this paper, “doing gender” as a process, framed by an expectation of “natural” gender differences and “natural” attraction of opposite genders to one another, thereby producing heteronormativity, of essential importance. Heteronormativity represents a part of the hierarchical system (Rubin, 1984; Hennessy, 2000), privileging masculinity and heterosexuality. In its turn, heterosexuality requires gender binary (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). In this article, we focus on the context of power and its connection to heteronormativity (Wagenknecht, 2007, p. 25) as well as the mechanisms of construction, reproduction and institutionalization of heteronormativity (Richardson, 1996).

Foucault (1990, p. 103; Čeplak, 2013, p. 162) claims sexuality to be the most instrumentalized element within power relations in the Western world. If we look at school as a space where power is being (re-)produced (Althusser, 2006, p. 88) and possibly resisted (Čeplak, 2013) and if we take into consideration the power of heteronormative discourse (Ferfolja, 2007) which dominates gender construction among youth (Jösting, 2007; Myers & Raymond, 2010; Garcia, 2009) and within school as an institution (Garcia, 2009; Čeplak, 2013); if we approach school systems as spaces which have difficulties accommodating “queer future” (McDonough,

2007, p. 798³), then we might expect conflicting positions within the LGBTTIQ-school-supporters' discussions. The students who are involved in the LGBTTIQ-support projects cannot but be simultaneously subjected to heteronormative discourse. The powerful shared discourse, which is essential for the formation of belonging to their fellow peers, is likely to clash with normative thinking they as activists have internalized and worked with (Acker, 2017; Wald, Rienzo, & Button, 2002).

The question we pose in this article is whether the discourse of heteronormativity and gender-binarity is visible, (re-)produced and challenged within the group discussions of the LGBTTIQ-support activists. If so, how? Which categories and specific mechanisms take place?

Education can become an important means for the inclusion of minorities and for deconstructing prejudice, discrimination and mobbing (Ferfolja, 2007; Mudrey & Medina-Adams, 2006; Čeplak, 2013). In/Exclusion are (re-)produced in educational practices as notions of norms and (ab-)normality, providing the participants of education processes with means to identify the (ab-)normal and to act with respect to it⁴. The production of in/exclusion alongside the concept of norms is essential for different diversity aspects (Krüger-Potratz & Lutz, 2002). It applies to all types of differences relevant for education (e.g. Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Fitch, 2003). While analyzing the discussions of LGBTTIQ-school supporters we realized that the concept of norms appears to be absolutely central for their articulation of LGBTTIQ-support work, for their motivation for this work and for the challenges they face.

³ see special issue of Journal of LGBT Youth on International perspectives on homophobic and transphobic bullying in schools, Joseph G. Kosciw & Oren Pizmony-Levy, 2016

⁴ For conceptions of (ab-)normality in education see also Schröter & Zimenkova (2019) (in print)

We share the perspective by Celia Kitzinger (2005), who shows how heteronormativity is put into action through norms and normativity. She works from the standpoint of ethnomethodology and conversational analysis and, referring to Sacks (1992), she understands norms as a way of providing “rules of relevance for selecting categories” (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 479). Heteronormative terms and inferences are thus not – necessarily – “designed to display anti-gay prejudice or to discriminate against non-heterosexual people. Rather, speakers are deploying person reference terms that they treat as ordinary and natural” (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 493). Norms exist implicitly and are implicitly internalized. They become explicit as soon as the social order, which these norms reproduce (Kitzinger, 2005, p. 494), clashes with the reality of social life. In our case this happens during the LGBTTIQ-support work. This clash makes the gap between the *knowledge*, which is reproduced through the LGBTTIQ-support work, and the *norms* of social order visible.

Elaborating on our research question we thus ask: *How do LGBTTIQ-supporters within educational systems, which operate according to heteronormative scripts (Myers and Raymond, 2010, p. 169), manage to work with these different implicit and explicit norms? And what kind of gender and sexual identity discourses do they produce? (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009, p. 457)*

Our question is whether the gap between knowledge on LGBTTIQ rights and involvement in LGBTTIQ-support and their existence within heteronormative discourse results in specific othering processes (Garcia, 2009; Johnson, Singh, & Gonzalez, 2014). Otherness would thus get produced within the inclusive narrative. Focusing on the concepts of norms, we seek to reconstruct who and how becomes branded as “the other” in the discussions. We look at the other as *tolerated* by an “I” functioning as a member of the majority (Čeplak, 2013, p. 177). *We also pose the question: Can LGBTTIQ-supporters manage to break the heteronormative power discourse in a school setting? Or are they trapped within it?* To answer this question, we focus

on the goals that the LGBTTIQ-supporters articulate, on the object of their actions and on their own self-perception in regard to power relations.

Impressive work has been done on how groups of teenagers or children produce gender from a gender binarity and heterosexuality perspective (Myers & Raymond, 2010; Jö스팅, 2007). It is however usually shown in group discussions with gender-homogeneous groups without any specific professionalized knowledge on LGBTTIQ-Identities. Our data is different in that the group discussions we are analyzing took place among activists of LGBTTIQ-support projects. These activists thus have knowledge of LGBTTIQ-identities and discrimination, they are aware of the suppressive power of heteronormativity. At the same time, as teenagers who are involved in group discussions, they activate heteronormative scripts (Myers & Raymond, 2010, p. 169) and operate within heteronormative discourse. We are looking at how these different scripts are being negotiated, and which categories emerge within these negotiations.

3. Methodology and data

Norms and normality as categories emerged as key categories during our data analysis. We want to demonstrate the concepts of norms and normativity that appear within the non-moderated group discussions among school LGBTIQ-support activists, given that the students are aware of LGBTTIQ identities and exclusion. But being put in groups, they are confronted with peer group dynamics and heteronormative expectations. The data was analyzed with help of sequential analysis (Oevermann, Allert, Konau, & Krambeck, 1979; Wernet, 2000) of the group discussions with school children, active within the network project “School of Diversity” in the Federal State of North-Rhein Westphalia in Germany. The discussion took place during the workshops, opened for students only, within the framework of annual meeting of actors active within the project. Adults – apart from workshop organisers – were not allowed to attend. For two years (2014 and 2015) the students were asked to discuss the challenges of their LGBTTIQ-

work at their own school in small groups, which consisted of students from different schools who had never met before. Participants were asked some structuring questions that focused on challenges, cooperation and interaction with different actors at school⁵. Students were aged from 14 to 18 y.o. and attended different types of schools⁶. Each of the 8 groups consisted of 6 students of mixed age, gender and types of school, and discussed for 45 minutes. The students were free to discuss their experiences and define goals for their LGBTTIQ-support work. Focus groups are a strong instrument to capture the “participants' co-construction of reality” (Myers & Raymond, 2010, p. 171), as they face the same challenges and suggest having some common context. This is where concepts of norms and normality become relevant.

The non-moderated discussions were audio recorded, transcribed⁷ and anonymized for analysis. The transcripts were fully sequentially analyzed (Oevermann et al., 1979, pp. 352–433). The case-focused sequential analysis treats each transcript protocol – group discussion – as a single case. It is based on the idea of everyday practice being led by norms of interaction and language; where actors have a number of possible communicative choices to make and there is a reasoning behind these choices (Reichert, 1997, p. 41). These choices produce individual meanings within a single case. Language and norms are thus seen as universal, but the choices made in each single communication are individual, so they must be analyzed as single, unique cases. Sequential analysis is a group analysis method. It seeks to reconstruct all possible kinds of readings for each expression. The analyzing group could for example ask: How many possible readings of the term “those affected” (*Betroffene*), the term, often used in order to describe LGBTTIQ-persons, are there? The group then detects the connotations of powerless-

⁵ The questions can be retrieved by the corresponding author

⁶ For an explanation of the specific school system in Germany, see e.g. Jürges & Schneider (2007)

⁷ GAT transcription system, suitable for conversational analysis, Selting et al., 1998

ness implicit in the term of “those affected,” but also connotations of illness, disability or “abnormality.” These readings are recorded and put into the context of the discussion; the most suitable one is agreed upon for each sequence. The explanatory readings are seen as central categories of the case.

During the data analysis of the first group, we found that the terms “norms” and “normality” play a big role within the discussion, and the ambivalence between “normal” and “different” structures the ways in which discussion participants address homo- and trans*sexuality. We believe that focusing on how “norm” and subsequently “difference” and “abnormality” are constructed within the group discussions, is essential in order to understand the power of heteronormative discourse and the power of the very notion of norm for the adolescents (e.g. Jösting, 2007). This focus also helps to reconstruct the heteronormative scripts they are operating with or trying to overcome.

Following example of analysis demonstrates, how we proceed analytically with respect to the construction of norms and normativity. We would like to stress that “norm” is not an analytical category we were striving for when we started the analysis, but a result of the analytical procedure.

Example of analysis:

I believe it has NOTHING to do with attitudes, you know? Ahm it is not an attitude, I am pro gays or I am against gays. It should not be an attitude, for it is just normal, gay is gay. One does no need to be pro or against it. (425–428, GD3⁸)

Here, the speaker articulates their idea of a norm while speaking about attitudes towards gay people. The possibility of having an attitude on gayness is negated by juxtaposing norm and attitude. A little later a contrary argument takes place within the same group discussion:

⁸ The abbreviation refers to the number of the group discussion – here Group Discussion No. 3 – as we only use some quotes, not all the analyzed group discussions are represented with quotations.

[One just has to] be open, just accept the (others') being different, stand up for it, demonstrate tolerance. (626–627, GD3)

Here, homosexuality – which is kept implicit, see below the non-naming of homosexuality – is clearly being articulated as “otherness,” meaning something which does not correspond to normality and must first be accepted by those who are “in” a position of power within the discourse. They are in a position to accept, tolerate and stand for the *others*, who themselves are dependent on acceptance. Both utterances construct the conceptions of norm and difference. Due to space constraints we limit ourselves to only showing very few examples of the categories we detected as important for the construction of the norm.

4. Empirical results

The analyzed group discussions demonstrate an ambivalent relation towards homosexuality and (seldom) trans* identities. The following three subchapters describe how LGBTTIQ-supporting students frame normality in the context of LGBTTIQ-identities, while highlighting the mechanisms of problematization of LGBTTIQ-identities and framing them as abnormality by the students. Later, we will demonstrate the tension between norm and difference/exceptionality/abnormality with regard to future visions of the integration for LGBTTIQ-identities, which students articulate. The last part of our empirical data demonstrates the ambivalence and tension that appear when students speak about discrimination, framing LGBTTIQ-persons as both victims and offenders.

4.1. Normal vs. different/other

Homo-, and rarely trans*-sexualities are articulated by students as both normal *and* problematic. In order to demonstrate this ambivalence we have chosen three quotations:

I believe it is part of the most normal things on Earth, everyone loves the person one loves, one cannot decide [whom to love]. At the moment I am in love with a woman, although usually I am – ahm- more into men. (604–606, GD1)

LGBTs are not an exception. Everyone has to internalise that. (405–406, GD3)

VS.

To be honest, I would not come out myself either. [...] But I generally believe that outing [as such] demonstrates once again, that it is something very special. Otherwise why should one have to confess to the others oh no, I am gay? (967–970, GD3)

Normality is thus framed as natural attraction; this cannot be changed or chosen by an individual. Being a gay man – being lesbian or trans* is seldom discussed in the data – is defined genetically and cannot be changed through external circumstances. Later on, the students address aspects of similarity and equality. Here, the person becomes a category. A human being, who is loved by another human being, is used in order to erase the borders between hetero-trans*- and homosexuals, as all of them are members of the same group of humans. These similarities between all people are explained with reference to the “sameness” of their ways of life:

ahm, there are students, and many parents as well, who think (--) these people live a completely DIFFERENT life; they have (.) I don't know: (.) totally (.) crazy jobs or something like that, but they just live life like everybody else does; there is only one difference, they just love a different human being; or they want to be someone else. (370–374, GD 1)

The participants create distance in their description of LGBTTIQ-persons by calling them “these people.” Referring to “loving the other (or) different human being” is also very common in this context. On the one hand, “human” as a category is homogenizing, in that there is a sense of equality and of freedom to love another human, no matter their gender. On the other hand this is quite vague.

At the same time, the speaker appears quite helpless in looking for examples of the norm. As they look for a possibility on how to disprove the notion that LGBTTIQ- persons are “completely different”, the students come to the idea to demonstrate, the LGBTTIQs are norm-conform. In order to do that, the notion of LGBTTIQ-persons’ having crazy lifestyle is being made clear as a false assumption. Here, the students are confronted with the *implicitness/invisibility of norms* as long as they are not challenged. This makes it very difficult for the students to explain that being LGBTTIQ does not *at least* challenge *other* norms. They try to understand which norms *are* challenged by LGBTTIQ-people. In this contribution, the trans*persons are addressed as those who just “want to be somebody else.” This construction is twofold, referring to the adaptiveness of trans*persons to implicit societal norms, as long as they live a “normal” life and have “normal” jobs, and the exclusiveness of their experience as “wanting to be someone else.” This implies a process of “becoming” somebody and frames trans*persons as *not-yet themselves* (compared to cis-persons, who are apparently are).

While trying to place LGBTTIQ-persons discursively into the frame of societal norms, the group discussions also demonstrate opposite tendencies, problematizing homo/trans*sexuality. The LGBTTIQ-actors are continuously addressed as “those affected” (“*Betroffene*”). In the German language *Betroffene* are people affected by a certain problem or situation, usually having negative and problematic impact on one’s life; it is often also something oneself cannot repair and oneself did not cause. One can be “*betroffen*,” i.e afflicted, of a flood for example. This term also points to the (at least) partial lack of agency (subalternisation in Spivak’s sense (1988) is too strong for this context). Those affected are at least partially dependent on others’ support in order to overcome the situation. The participants continuously address the LGBTTIQ-persons as those “affected”, they use other forms of description that point to the exclusion of the group or that problematize LGBTTIQ-persons:

well, these are the affected [...] how do you call this? Hm... [...] those affected (837–839, GD3)

experienced people with the same problem [are invited to] report, how can I = how shall one call this? (---) People who have the same [problem]. (352–354, GD1)

In this case, the participant of the discussion addresses LGBTTIQ-persons as those that have the *same problem*. LGBTTIQ people are thus homogenized through the “problem” and through their “affectedness.” LGBTTIQ-identity becomes problematized, because the specifics of a person cause problems in their everyday life. Here we may observe how an antidiscrimination discourse clashes with the power and norms within society. Students’ effort to develop strategies to support LGBTTIQs in school is based on the understanding of LGBTTIQ-identity as problematic; the idea of a self-help-group emerges, while LGBTTIQs turn into those with a problem. By no means do we seek to criticize the students for not being reflective. Instead we aim to demonstrate how they introduce their antidiscrimination work into the heteronormative discourse.

In this example we see a clear tension between the attempt at describing and perceiving LGBTTIQs as normality, and the articulation of them being different/exceptional:

We had a girl in our school, she came out, and then she decided to (.) undertake surgeries and to become a boy. And now (.) well at the moment we call (.) HIM John (.) That’s what he wants and he doesn’t want to be a girl anymore, and we all actually accepted that. At first it was of course DIFFERENT for all of us (-) and (.) we did not know how to handle it, but for the time being it is actually quite ok. (207–213, GD2)

Here, the speaker articulates the process of accepting the difference, and at the same time claims that it is *natural* to be disoriented by the coming out of a trans*person. It was natural to be unsure how to handle the trans* coming out of a school mate, while now it is okay to accept the student as a boy. To the speaker this example is a success: A majority has managed to accept a minority; the main perspective then is the success of learning how to integrate the difference. The difficulties of coming out or John’s possible emotions of not being accepted in

his identity at first are not a part of the norm/difference discourse. The arguments come from the standpoint of heteronormative discourse, which opens up in order to integrate the difference.

Another mechanism of constructing *difference* is highlighting LGBTTIQs as a specific group of actors. Students consider LGBTTIQs as the best possible counselors for LGBTTIQ-students. Belonging to the group of LGBTTIQ is believed to provide LGBTTIQ community members with special competences, as they share common problems:

I believe when ahm well, if there is, well, often there is a gay or lesbian teacher, and if (.) well if one is gay and kind of not really ready to come out, then I believe it is easier to talk to somebody about it, to somebody, who (.) is knowledgeable about it, because he himself used to have these problems, the teacher himself, and I believe in this case it would be better to have this teacher as a guidance, a counselor, it would be better than a normal one.
(760–765, GD3)

This discourse can be found in many more sequences of the group discussions. We observe heteronormative discourse and the meaning of “normality” as a term: it constructs heteronormativity. Heterosexuality is the norm, so a non-homosexual teacher is described as a normal one, even though homosexuality here becomes a source of specific expertise needed for LGBTTIQ students. The experiences of LGBTTIQs are qualified as “problems,” which again reveals the tension between the normal and the abnormal/problematic. The discriminatory experiences of LGBTTIQ-persons are framed as exceptional experience (see below). Belonging to the LGBTTIQ-community automatically becomes a kind of expertise that one possesses and cannot refuse to perform (the forced expertise of the LGBTTIQ-persons, as we have shown elsewhere, Molitor and Zimenkova (2019) (in print)). This constructs the expectation of knowledge shared exclusively by LGBTTIQ community, and thereby also the expectation that only community can help its own community. This is different from the anti-discrimination work, as the latter is supposed to embrace all of society.

Observing normality as a category helps to demonstrate how articulating LGBTTIQ-identities as part of societal normality/norm clashed with the heteronormative discourse the students are a part of. This makes them describe LGBTTIQ as significantly *different*.

4.2. The conceptions of societal life: “it should be normal” vs. “it is different”

The students stick to their ambivalent stance by keeping in mind their wish for acceptance of LGBTTIQ in society. They articulate the wish for homo- (and seldom trans*) sexualities to become a normal, unquestioned part of society; simultaneously, they keep describing them as special. The following quotation shows the student’s wish for LGBTTIQ-identities to be a normality in society:

I just want to feel like they simply belong here and that they’re really normal. (GD3, 248–249)

Yes, you simply need someone who supports you/stands behind you and tells you: it’s absolutely normal. (218f, GD2)

As they articulate the wish of full integration for LGBTTIQ-persons, the participants simultaneously produce distance from the group: They use the pronoun “die” (“*those people, those*”), saying “that ‘*those people*’ simply belong here, ‘they’ are really normal.”

The idea of a LGBTTIQ-inclusive society results in a picture of someone who has discursive power and supports or stands “behind” the LGBTTIQ-person, thus framing LGBTTIQ-identity as “absolutely normal.” The power of heteronormative discourse is articulated very tangibly as someone in power and in charge of framing normality.

We believe this part of the group discussion demonstrates the conflict, the LGBTTIQ-supporters are trapped in: between the promotion of human rights for LGBTTIQ-persons and a type of physically personalized heteronormative discourse. They ultimately hope for the latter

to be changed. Although the students are sensitive to LGBTTIQ-issue, they are influenced by the power of the discourse. They cannot imagine inclusion of LGBTTIQ-persons without permanent “permission” of the (heteronormative) discourse.

This collision results in establishing normativity. All the group discussions include the request to abolish the usage of “gay” as a swearing word by sanctioning it. The participation in LGBTTIQ-support projects is actually articulated as a possible and used practice to tackle and sanction school homophobia⁹. The students deem important that sanctions must be connected to real penalties. The call for penalties once again refers to the power of the discourse. Students don’t seem to believe that education could be enough to break homophobia:

And then sometimes you have this one person, they’re homophobic, they are constantly yelling “you’re gay, I will smash the gays” [...] He is going to be punished, the teacher then says that he has to go and participate in the anti-homophobia project for 6 hours (674–679, GD2) [later in the discussion]: yes, it is meant as a punishment. (683, GD2)

While elaborating on how to reach normality for LGBTTIQ within society, the students develop the idea of visible uniformity:

One can do this way for example, that everyone puts on the SAME color at a sports meeting or something like that, everyone wears pink or something, so that you show we are all the same. (408–410, GD1)

Here, the idea of equality is promoted as visible uniformity. Homage is paid to the color pink, a color framed within the heteronormative discourse as an LGBTTIQ-color. The idea of “normality” of LGBTTIQ is thus once again instilled into heteronormativity, as it suggests the opportunity for *real* LGBTTIQs to hide within the uniformity of pink color as it would be by everyone at that particular occasion.

⁹ We do not know whether some of the students in our workshops are participants of such sanctions.

Despite the articulated wish to include LGBTTIQ-persons, students cannot refrain from suggesting a different mode of dress for LGBTTIQ, thus making them different and exclusive (and thus discursively excluded). This takes place both implicitly and explicitly. On the level of implicit exclusion one should pay attention to the language-based distancing: they manage not to specify LGBTTIQ while talking about them¹⁰.

As an example, when students talk about LGBTTIQs they say:

GD1: these things (271), these people (577–587; 602), them, those (704)

GD2: if things like these are accepted at school (559f)

We can observe a very interesting phenomenon here, namely the implicitness of LGBTTIQ-talk or even declaring LGBTTIQ-terminology taboo within the activists' conversation. Once again one may observe the clash of the normative work on LGBTTIQ-issues, and the powerful heteronormative discourse. This makes LGBTTIQ-work easy, as long as it is not outspoken.

This implicitness is one of the possible obstacles for real inclusion of LGBTTIQ. At the same time, explicit addressing of LGBTTIQs as a minority has similar potential for exclusion. The students see coming out as a necessary prerequisite for inclusion and equality; because as long as nobody knows that they are LGBTTIQ-persons, they will not form part of normality. The process of coming out is still being declared taboo or problematized by the students:

Then this secret is just gone, this big (.) [...] secret, which is not a secret. (405f, GD1)

¹⁰ The implicitness of addressing the LGBTTIQ identities seems to be common with LGBTTIQ-interview partners, who speak about their own identity e.g. Zimenkova and Molitor (2017).

And that is why most people would rather keep quiet, because they are scared that they are immediately seen as a monster (.), (xxx) ua::h, that is a man who is into men. (950–953, GD3)

Even within an activist context the students articulate the fear of coming out as well-founded. The elaboration on coming out goes further; it demonstrates the clash with the heteronormative discourse:

I think the estimated number of unreported cases of (.) homosexuals, people who do want to come out at school, is HIGH. (204f, GD2)

The wording “estimated number of unreported cases” is a reference to criminal language: crimes go “unreported.” Here LGBTTIQ are discursively framed as the (or in) danger. It also creates a frame of necessary activities in order to help those in the closet come out, and once again enables the minority/majority divide between possible victims; those that are not reported and thus not visible; and the others, who see the problem and are in a position to help.

Coming out is talked about as possibly creating more distance from one’s own activism:

I would also swallow, if a good friend of mine, right, somehow, or somebody, with whom one were together once or so, would suddenly say, hey, I am gay. You then contemplate and think what does this do to your own self, that this (.) is a bit of a topic, it’s simply like that. (997–1000, GD3)

Here, the speaker positions themselves as a member of the majority, and differentiates strongly between themselves as an activist, supporting human rights for LGBTTIQ-persons, and as a member of society and confronted with LGBTTIQ-identities in real life. Once again we may observe how student activists are trapped within heteronormative discourse and take part in this discourse as soon as LGBTTIQ-identities turn from abstract human rights into real life agents.

The next ambivalence with respect to LGBTTIQ as normality becomes visible as the participants articulate the possibilities of speaking about LGBTTIQ-identities within the school

curriculum. They express both wishes: wanting to talk about LGBTTIQs explicitly in class and addressing the topic rather implicitly, without any special references to the school subject:

And that once a week or once a month there is uh an hour where one can talk about these things. (269–271, GD1)

VS.

[...] One does not deal with the topic of lesbians or gays or something like that, one comes up with a topic that appears to have lesbians and gays in it (.) Because they just (.) simply happen to appear/ to be in it. (243–245, GD3)

Once again the students are uncertain whether the LGBTTIQS are a special limited topic, or whether they are or should be a normal part of life and society.

4.3. Framing LGBTTIQs as victims and perpetrators

This last point deals with a very specific type of victimization of LGBTTIQs. Sometimes they are also made out to be perpetrators. LGBTTIQs are seen as something casual and normal, but are simultaneously framed as victims of discrimination and as active perpetrators of discriminatory activities:

A person who says “Yuck” or “you are gay” doesn’t see what this provokes within a person. (524–529, GD 1)

However, one must add - well I know a lot of gays (-) and they partially exclude themselves on purpose. (880–881, GD3)

The students’ concept of discrimination becomes visible in relation to the exclusion mechanisms within school. The examples of discrimination range from using the word “gay” as a swearing word, derogatory comments during LGBTTIQ-relevant discussions in classes and explicitly homophobic phrases. These discriminatory activities are addressed as especially

relevant when it comes to the possibility of coming out – which is framed as a great necessity for LGBTTIQs – and with respect to the possibility of having a fulfilling emotional life as a LGBTTIQ-student. At the same time students articulate some of the same exclusion mechanisms that, as they believe, LGBTTIQ-persons themselves use. Students believe that LGBTTIQ-persons could exclude themselves, whether consciously or unconsciously:

I mean (--) when you run around the city with pink legging on, and I mean everybody should do what they want, but (--) I mean you don't do it because you do it then, but because you want to provoke.. at least partially- I think [...] (893–896, GD3)

It is interesting to see that this form of self-made exclusion only works if one frames normality as an existing set of rules, which can be challenged by non-conformity. The task of LGBTTIQ-persons would then be to adapt to the existing discourse, if they do not want to be excluded. The power to define what is acceptable stays with the majority.

The students also speak about the group-building activities of LGBTTIQ. They are perceived by cis/hetero students to be exclusive:

At school this is different, because you have to interact with each other, but now like this uh someday in their free time, well there you are partially (excluded), as a woman, not allowed to enter the clubs, as a woman they talk to you less, you also have to see it from the other perspective right? (886–889, GD3)

As they consider themselves to be part of the discourse of norm and power, which defines who is included and excluded, the students discuss that LGBTTIQs themselves partially produce (their own?) discriminatory experiences. Another typical example of LGBTTIQs as a source of discrimination is a hypothetical destiny of the child of a homosexual family, who may be bullied. As the students find themselves confronted with inequality and possible tensions, the students try at least partially return the responsibility for the discrimination to the victims

themselves. The solution would then be for the LGBTTIQs to just completely adapt to the heteronormative discourse, in order for the not to be discriminated. This attempt to shift LGBTTIQs out of the position of being a victim into one of being responsible for their own discrimination demonstrates how the students want to comply with both the heteronormative discourse they are a part of, and with the task of protecting and promoting human rights for LGBTTIQ. As the students are confronted with the power of discourse they come up with the idea that those outside of the discourse should adapt - and be supported in the process of adapting.

5. Discussion

At the beginning of this article we posed the question: Along which categories and with what kind of specificities does both heteronormative discourse and gender-binarity become visible in the group discussions? How are they (re-)produced and challenged within the group discussions of the LGBTTIQ-support activists?

We then proceeded to show the power of heteronormative discourse, and the scripts and attempts of the students to support LGBTTIQ-persons and to formulate ways out of exclusion and discrimination. These attempts however clash with the notion of heteronormativity and norms, and with the understanding of the power of discourse. Interestingly, the students, who see it as their task to support fellow LGBTTIQ-students, do not necessarily see teachers as fellow supporters (apart from the LGBTTIQ teachers). As we have shown elsewhere, the students believe to be solely responsible for fighting heteronormativity and exclusion (Kilian & Zimenkova, 2016).

Heteronormativity and coping with norms become visible in the intense groups discussions and the power of heteronormative discourse (Taylor et al., 2016) is made tangible as a

person who has the power to allow other forms of love, sexuality and gender identity “to just be/exist.”

LGBTTIQ-supporters are trapped between the conviction that it is a necessity to promote and provide human rights for fellow LGBTTIQ-students, and heteronormative discourse. This discourse appears rigid and unable to be easily changed in the near future, so they search for other ways to integrate LGBTTIQ-identities into existing heteronormativity. They do not seem to believe in the power of education alone and thus plead for sanctions against homophobic fellow students. Heteronormativity seems to be unbreakable without the use of penalties.

We are well aware of the limitations of this research: the groups of students are aware of LGBTTIQ-identities and their rights and they discuss their activist work in a safe space. We however do not know whether some of the participants were present because they were being punished for homophobia. These limitations do however make the results especially meaningful.

Although they operate within a LGBTTIQ-friendly environment, and their common goal is to make the school LGBTTIQ-friendly, in their discussions the students reproduce heteronormative discourse, make the explicit addressing of LGBTTIQ identities a taboo and posit heterosexuality to be a norm. They also call for the majority to be open and tolerant, meaning they do not question power. The fact that this happens in a LGBTTIQ friendly space, within a project supported by the school ministry and thus theoretically supposed to reproduce liberal gender regimes, means we must inquire further into heteronormativity as a powerful framework within education.

Acknowledgements: We would like to express our gratitude to the participants of the workshops, for their LGBTTIQ-support work and for their openness in the intense discussions.

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