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### **Making sex, moving difference**

*An ethnography of sexuality and diversity in Dutch schools*

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## Chapter 5

# Locked in the matrix? Heteronormativity in secondary school friendship and teaching practices

### Abstract

This chapter explores the ways in which heteronormativity is enacted through friendship and teaching practices in and around secondary schools. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three schools in the Netherlands, it describes heteronormativity as relational and situational. Among pupils, heteronormativity was presupposed yet also made in practices of forming, consolidating or ending friendships. Relations between teachers and pupils showed heteronormativity to be differentiated across contexts: in two schools heterosexuality was drawn in to ease teaching relations, while at a third school it was seen as a hindrance to academic achievements and was therefore relegated to the private sphere. This chapter shows that heteronormativity might not only regulate gendered and sexual identity constitution but works in realms of social life that are often desexualized. It also breaks with the tendency to produce singular accounts of heteronormativity and its effect in schools.

## **Introduction: Locked in the matrix?**

Since its introduction, the notion of heteronormativity has become one of the most important concepts in gender and sexuality studies. It describes a pervasive, often invisible norm of heterosexuality (Warner, 1991) that assumes a binary conception of sex (male/female), with corresponding gender expression (masculine/feminine), and a natural attraction to the opposite sex (heterosexuality). This heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) renders alternative sexualities 'other' and marginal. It describes 'not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life' (Jackson, 2006, p. 17), which regulates those within as well as outside of its bounds. Bringing together gender and sexuality in a rigid mould, heteronormativity has proven to be a foe that unified queer and feminist studies (Wiegman, 2006).

One area that has been recognized as important in the construction of gender, and in which heteronormativity is pervasive, is that of education. In recent publications, schools have been described as 'hegemonically heterosexual' (Batsleer, 2012), characterized as oppressive and tense spaces, where 'heterosexuality is the ever-present, regulating influence in classrooms' (Ryan, 2016, p. 79), and as invisibly structured by heteronormativity (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010). This heteronormative structure silences or disparages queer sexualities (Ryan, 2016) and is seen as in need of being 'tackled' (Sauntson & Simpson, 2011). Furthermore, heteronormativity has been described as an implicit moral framework (Vinjamuri, 2015), or an ideology (Yep, 2002), that 'hurts everyone' (Knight, Shoveller, Oliffe, Gilbert, & Goldenberg, 2012). Ironically, despite its constructionist roots, the concept is thus increasingly presented in a realist framework in which schools are heteronormative spaces. Instead of an assumption of schools as heteronormative independent of the people and practices within them, this chapter will engage with the makings of heteronormativity in schools.

Revising their use of the heterosexual matrix in an analysis of school-based fieldwork, Atkinson and DePalma (2009, p. 17) wonder whether 'through naming and believing the heterosexual matrix and identifying evidence of its operation, we reify, reinforce and reinscribe it, even as we attempt to subvert, unsettle or deconstruct it'. The metaphor

of the matrix, they explain, implies an image of a structure 'out there' that constructs its subjects. To allow for an investigation of heteronormativity as a collective process, they suggest 'un-believing the matrix' as a starting point for ethnographic explorations of sexuality in schools. Several others have commented on the possibility that the critique of heteronormativity reifies the phenomenon. Jackson, for example, suggested that 'to say that a phenomenon such as heterosexuality or gender is normative [...] may prove to be overly deterministic (2006, p. 109). Similarly, warning against simplifying or reifying heteronormativity, Butler (2006) observed that studies often describe merely two options: either subjects submit to the heteronorm, or they escape it. Though the uptake of the concept of the heterosexual matrix has been extensive, Butler has discontinued using the term precisely as it 'became a kind of totalizing symbolic' (Butler, Osborne, & Segal 1994, p. 36).

This study wants to avoid an interpretation of heteronormativity as an anterior and universal reality. Drawing from fieldwork in secondary schools, this analysis shifts the focus of study from identity performance to social relations, namely friendships and teaching relations. Foregrounding how heteronormativity might operate in realms that are not considered 'sexual' but 'social', my objective is twofold: to understand how heteronormativity functions in relation to friendships and teaching relations and, in turn, how heteronormativity is generated through friendship and teaching practices.

### **'How to survive school? Make friends!'**

While the majority of academic studies is concerned with gendered identity formation and the (in)ability to develop or express sexual orientation, secondary school is described by youths themselves as 'a place for meeting friends' (Lahelma, 2002). In the Netherlands, a bestselling book marketed to pupils anxious about transitioning to secondary school addresses 'how to survive' the first year with advice on how to find and keep friends (Oomen, 2015).

Whereas the issue of friendship is attended to frequently in studies of primary schools (see for example Duits, 2008; Bruegel, 2006), ethnographies of secondary school more often focus on sexuality (Martino, 1999; Pascoe, 2007; Ringrose, 2013). While there are ethnographies that explicitly engage with the issue of sexuality in primary school (Kuik, 2013; Renold, 2005), there remains little engagement with how friendships are lived in secondary school (but see Hey, 1997 for an exception). The minority of studies that attend to friendships in schools often cast them as vehicles through which a gendered/sexualized identity is performed (for example Pascoe 2007; Ringrose, 2013). As several studies have pointed out, when attention to friendship is paid, heteronormativity is seen to 'get in the way' of boy-girl friendships, as these quickly become heterosexualized (Pascoe, 2007; Renold, 2005). Furthermore, studies show that heteronormativity can hierarchize friendship groups: attractiveness and popularity with the other sex becomes a marker of popularity among the same sex (Duncan, 2004; Duncan & Owens, 2011). These indications of the importance of heteronormativity in the splitting of friendship groups into boys and girls, as well as in setting up a hierarchy of popularity, raise further questions about whether and how heteronormativity structures friendship practices. Though I do not want to deny the importance of friendship groups for the performative constitution of individual identities, the focus here is different: it is to understand the different means and effects of heteronormativity, including its importance in the consolidation of friendships (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009).

While school might be an important place for pupils to meet friends, it is also a place that is shared with teachers.<sup>44</sup> Though many studies have identified schools and classrooms as arenas for the construction of gender and sexuality, attention to the role of teachers in this process has been relatively limited (Francis & Skelton, 2001). Recently, some studies interested in countering homophobia in classrooms have focused on teachers (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010) and the ways in which they can effectively challenge homophobic remarks and behaviours. As teachers are not only

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<sup>44</sup> And support and administrative staff, although these are often physically separated from pupils.

responsible for conveying a certain curriculum, but also for limiting the range of movements and behaviours of their pupils (Nespor, 1997), the ways in which they can police gender and sexuality have been well documented (Garcia, 2009; Kehily, 2002; Martino & Frank, 2006). The ways in which their mundane teaching relations rely on and produce heteronormativity, however, have been comparatively underexplored.

The question then, is not one of how friendships and teachers influence gender identity formation. Instead, it is one of understanding how friendship and teaching practices in school spaces are influenced by heteronormativity, and how this normativity is generated through these practices in turn. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in three secondary schools in the Netherlands, this chapter argues that heteronormativity is central to the making, practicing and breaking of friendships among pupils, and that teachers employ and enact heteronormativity in different ways in their pedagogic practices in attempts to connect to pupils and to improve their academic achievements.

## **The study**

The system for secondary education in the Netherlands is divided into three levels: pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO, subdivided into three levels), general secondary education (havo), and pre-university education (VWO, divided into athenaeum and gymnasium). A test during the last year of primary school, when pupils are around the age of twelve, is 'a crucial moment which sorts students into subsequent educational tracks which largely determine their later educational trajectories' (Schnell, Keskiner, & Crul, 2013, p. 134). Most pupils (60%), having finished elementary school, continue their education in pre-vocational schools (VMBO).

Despite a commitment to 'equal opportunities', the Dutch system has some unintended consequences: the influence of family background is higher in differentiated systems, thus countering the democratising function of schooling (Netjes, Werfhorst, Dijkstra, & Geboers, 2011; Rineke Van Daalen, 2010). For example, it has been shown that due to the early differentiation, ethnic minority students in the Netherlands have a lower

chance of reaching higher education in comparison to those in countries where later differentiation takes place (Crul, 2013). While it is possible for pupils with a pre-vocational diploma to continue in general secondary education, and for pupils with a general secondary education diploma to continue in the pre-university track, in practice there is a divide between pre-vocational secondary education and general secondary education (Stevens, Clycq, Timmerman, & Van Houtte, 2011), and obtaining degrees has become increasingly difficult (Stam, 2017). This divide has become more pronounced as school levels have relatively recently been separated, with schools offering just one level. Notably, there are many schools that offer only the pre-vocational level and many that offer both the higher secondary and the pre-university level. This separation leads to 'racially and socioeconomically segregated schools' (Paulle, 2013, p. 9), in which the pre-vocational schools are attended by children with a working-class background or ethnic minority background, whereas pre-university schools are more likely to be attended mostly by white pupils with an upper middleclass background.

Data used in this chapter derive from three schools: two of them were pre-vocational schools, while the third one offered general secondary and pre-university education. In this third school I followed a class in the pre-university track. The classes that were studied were in year 2 or 3, with pupils ranging in age from 13-17. Over the course of 15 months, I observed and participated in classes, lunchbreaks, and many informal conversations, as well as the occasional school trip or party. Next to these observations, I conducted more formal interviews.

While the study was not set up as a comparison of schools or school levels, the data point to some contrasts in how heteronormativity worked across the schools. There was an atmosphere of light-heartedness and playfulness at the first school, Rijnsbergcollege. This pre-vocational school was divided into two locations; the one in which I studied was attended by about 300 pupils. It was characterized by a high level of connectedness: most teachers knew the first names of the majority of pupils. Many of the pupils that were in class together had known each other before, either through primary school, sports memberships, or through family or neighbourhood connections. The section on friendship practices will draw mostly from this school.

Nexus High, the second school, was a relatively new school for pre-vocational education, and distinguished itself from other schools in the region by emphasising sports and personal development to enhance the talents of their pupils. The 1400 pupils were housed in a large and modern building that encompassed a recording studio, many athletic facilities, and was decorated with prizes won by previous pupils and pictures of alumni who had become local or national celebrities.

The third school, Bernarduslyceum, once again became a school for general secondary and pre-university education eight years ago, after the pre-vocational track was discontinued. The oldest of the four secondary schools in the medium sized city, it had a reputation of being old-fashioned and somewhat elitist. The school's popularity has decreased slightly in recent years, though at the time of this study it was attended by approximately 1300 pupils, which was still close to the maximum capacity of the building.

### **Practicing friendship: watching six-packs, drinking beer**

While many of the participants mentioned having at least one friend outside of the school, classmates were the most important source of friendships and were the friends most time was spent with, inside as well as outside of the school. Friendships, anthropological research has found, foster a sense of belonging (Dyson, 2010; Hey, 1997), or as one pupil explained to me, are crucial as 'in school it is just important that you are not by yourself.' This concern with not moving through the school alone was voiced often. Here, I will take a closer look at what exactly is done and said in moments of being together among friends.

In one of the physical education classes that I observed at Rijnsbergcollege, Priscilla and three of her friends had distanced themselves from the sports activities and gathered on a bench nearby. Sitting closely together, wearing identical school PE uniforms, they were bent over to watch the screen of Priscilla's phone. When pulling out her phone, which she had secretly smuggled into the PE hall in her bra, Priscilla proposed that they 'watch six-packs on hot-or-not.' Laughter ensued while doing so, and

the girls took turns glancing at teacher Inge, making sure their defection from the PE class was not noticed. Later, they explained the smartphone application *hot or not*.

Jenna: hot or not. Well then you get...

Mieke: let Kelly tell it!

Kira: I don't play that game

Jenna: I will tell

Brianna: and I will add

Jenna: you make an account and someone else too

Daisy: with Facebook

Jenna: yes with Facebook

[laughter]

Jenna: you can put pictures online and you can choose women or men and until what age and then you get to see a lot of pictures and then you can press cross or heart. Cross is that you turn down that person, and heart is that you think that person is nice and handsome.

[all in the background while Jenna talks: wooooo]

[author]: and can the other person see what you have pressed?

Brianna: yes only if he liked you

The six-pack, a colloquial term used to refer to well-defined abdominal muscles, has become an important element of boys' social media presence (Allen, Harvey, & Mendick, 2015; Harvey, Ringrose, & Gill, 2013; Leurs, 2012). In advertising, the figure of the 'good-looking male "six-pack"' (Gill, 2009) emerged as a highly specific way of representing the male body. Balancing representations of men as sex objects, over the past three decades advertisers have found modes of representation that 'appeal simultaneously to (at least) three different constituencies: gay men, heterosexual women and heterosexual men' (Gill, 2009, p. 146). In the game played by the girls, the signifier 'six-pack' is recognized as legitimating the 'heterosexual female gaze' (*Ibid.*). While one could say that the four girls are engaging principally in a session of 'gazing', the looking at boys' bodies is actually

instrumental in the consolidation of their friendship, an effect that seems amplified through the secrecy and the physical closeness of their bodies. I want to suggest that it is not the attraction to boys' bodies, and thus a performance of heterosexuality, that is central here, but that the availability of the game on Priscilla's phone, during PE class, facilitates the intimate bonding among girls, contributing to their friendship. Although set up as a dating application, there was no intention of dating among these girls – watching pictures and counting how many times someone had a 'match' was not the aim. Only once did one of them respond to a message, but she quickly stopped the conversation and deleted this contact as her 'match' was 'talking dirty'. *Hot or not* was referred to as a game, which has more social and less romantic or sexual connotations. Heterosexual attraction, implied in the 'boy-watching' by girls, and in the boy-girl mode of the game that was selected, was functional in this practice of friendship, and the joy that arose from playing this 'game' functioned to link laughter and intimacy. In the conversation in which I asked about this game, the girls giggled together and finished each other's sentences, thereby demonstrating their being 'in-tune' which further consolidated their friendship (Coates, 2007).

When one day a teacher called in sick in the morning, the first two hours were cancelled for the class that I studied at Rijnsbergcollege, and about 12 pupils went to Zoe's house 'to chill'.

Arriving at Zoe's place, we enter the cabin in the backyard that houses a bar with liquor on top, a dartboard, and is decorated with pictures of fishing trips taken by Zoe's father and his friends. Hanging out in the cabin in the backyard, it was not long before Damian asked Zoe for a beer, which she subsequently gave to him. The cabin is filled with pupils, there aren't enough chairs for everyone, some sit on each other's lap or on the armrests and the group seems to be a bit hesitant about what to do next. It is cold on this November morning, and Jordan asks Zoe whether the girls can go inside. I stick with the boys, but after one of the girls came back to the cabin for the third time to ask me/order me to come inside with her as "all the girls are inside", I give in.

In the living room, the girls are watching MTV, commenting on popstar Rihanna's new video clip, eating crisps. When I go and see what is happening in the cabin a bit later, I find all the boys are now drinking beer or are trying some of the liquor from the bar. Meanwhile, they are singing vulgar and homophobic songs, playing darts ('the cunts' against 'the gays', I read on the scoreboard) and engaging in physical horseplay. The atmosphere signals excitement about the illicit drinking, and increasing worry about returning to school for class: some boys breathe repeatedly in each other's (and my) faces to check whether the alcohol can be detected. Back at school, a teacher realized Damian and Justin had consumed alcohol, as they did not walk straight and were exceptionally loud. They were called to the principal's office and got suspended for the rest of the day.

In the description of this event, we see how an unexpected morning in school led to a group of pupils hanging out at Zoe's place. In the cabin, though, it was unclear what exactly the group should do: pupils appeared restless and unsure on how to do this 'chilling'. When Damian started drinking, Jordan and the other girls decided to go inside, splitting the group into boys and girls. The boys then drank alcohol and started playing darts, whereas the girls, inside, drank soda and ate crisps while watching and commenting on music videos. Drinking alcohol has been described as a pleasurable friendship practice – 'a social pleasure rather than an individual experience' (Niland, Lyons, Goodwin, & Hutton, 2013), and this is what happened in the cabin in the garden: there was a constant conversation about feeling and smelling the effects of alcohol, and, among those inside, a conversation about the drinking boys. It constituted these boys as 'out of line' teenagers that did crazy things with friends. The performative practices of heteronormative masculinity, through physical horseplay and using sexist terms for the darts-teams, reiterated gendered stereotypes.

Drinking stories were not only told by boys, but by girls as well, in which they functioned similarly to display connectedness. Zoe and Alyssa, for example, told me about being drunk and peeing in the middle of the

street one night, a story that was interrupted by laughter, giggling and excitement (see also: Cullen, 2011). In this particular morning, in the larger, mixed group, and in the shed with its decoration that invoked a particularly classed adult masculinity (darts, fishing, alcohol), however, it was the boys who drank. The incident became a story that was told over and over again. Some pupils, two years later at the graduation ceremony, jokingly asked me, “Do you remember that one time we were drunk during school[hours]?”, thereby highlighting this particular instance as a formative moment in their schoolyears. Such storytelling should be understood as a powerful way of ‘doing friendship’ through which boys ‘display connectedness with each other, while at the same time telling stories of heroism or laddishness which construct and maintain hegemonic masculinity’ (Coates, 2008, p. 105).

Both of these vignettes show how the joy, laughter and consolidation of bonds among friends were presupposing as well as enacting heterosexuality. Observing the pleasure with which primary school pupils ‘insert themselves into the heterosexual matrix’, Paechter suggests understanding this as partly arising ‘from belonging, from inserting oneself into a heterosexually constructed gender, shared with older children and with adults’ (Paechter, 2015, p. 12). The next section will shift attention to the moments in which such joy and laughter is absent.

### **Discontinuing friendships: gossip and distancing**

One of the girls of the group that engaged in the ‘six-pack’ watching, Jenna, transferred to Rijnsbergcollege at the beginning of the school year. She started dating a boy who lived in a nearby city and was fully consumed by her new love, chatting with him on her smartphone almost non-stop. This was going on for about three weeks when the following happened.

One morning, Jenna starts crying. Jayden shouts: ‘Jenna is not happy today because she has had an abortion!’. Jenna snaps: ‘Act normal!’, and leaves the classroom. I share a desk with Leslie and Manon. Manon asks Leslie, ‘Is it true, did she have an

abortion?’ Leslie is not sure and makes clear she doesn’t care either by shrugging her shoulders. When Manon has found out later, she comes up to me and tells me she knows what happened: ‘Priscilla said Jenna was pregnant. But that’s what you get when you are new’. Later that day, I ask Priscilla, who is one of Jenna’s best friends, what was going on between them. She tries to avoid answering and tells me with a nervous giggle that it was ‘nothing’ and, ‘just a joke’.

The joke resulted in Jenna’s sexual behaviour becoming the central topic of conversation in class. Jenna got upset, left the classroom crying and called in the help of the class-teacher. Priscilla was well aware of the effects of her ‘joke’, as she seemed very nervous when I asked her what was going on: she was blushing, giggling, and avoiding the question. Spreading the abortion rumour functioned as a warning to Jenna to not ignore her friends at the expense of her boyfriend and to stay in line with the rest of the girls in the group, who were sexually inexperienced. Calling on empathy, the teacher, who, like Priscilla, referred to the incident as a joke, urged the pupils to stop making such jokes as ‘they can hurt’. This call for empathy left the content of the fight untouched.

Manon’s remark – ‘that’s what you get when you are new’ – indicates that such jokes that police sexuality and femininity are not a rarity and might be part of forging new friendships. A few months later, Jenna befriended another group of girls, from a different class. When the timetable allowed for it, she spent her breaks with the new group of friends who became her primary friends. The fight that revolved around Jenna’s recent sexual and romantic relation confirms the centrality of sexual regulation of femininity to the friendship of girls (Ringrose, 2013; Chambers, Tincknell, & Loon 2004; Renold, 2005; Hey, 1997; Kehily, 2002).

This centrality of sexuality is not exclusive to girls, as became clear in a group discussion on friendship and friendship-groups. Five pupils of Rijnsbergcollege explained why Damian is not part of their group – a group that had formed at the beginning of secondary school (about 15 months prior), with some members having known each other since kindergarten.

Anthony: But... how shall I say it he acts much older than we are  
Timmy: yes  
Paul: how shall I put it he is much further  
Roberto: he turned 14  
Paul: well you don't really see that. But to us..  
He says to us. yes. I don't know if I can say this but..  
Anthony: yes. Yes  
Paul: yes but anyway. He is. His sexworld is waaaaay waaay  
further than we are.  
Timmy: yesss  
Paul: and, smoking  
Interviewer: yes..  
Paul: and well, I do it as well sometimes  
Timmy: smoking?  
Paul: [no] but he drives a scooter almost every day, on the road.  
With him it is like... people just think let him go [...] it is his own life  
Timmy: he will end up badly

When Paul confided that Damian was 'further in his sexworld', the others added that he was out of line, and 'acted older' in relation to smoking and driving a scooter as well. At school, Damian regularly boasted about the sex he had had the night before with his girlfriend. This sparked questions from the other boys, who asked him about it often. He became a resource on sexuality, pregnancy prevention and the female body, someone whose information they used to become sexually knowledgeable. They listened to him carefully – while at the same time placing significance on the difference in sexual experience between Damian and themselves. Although the boys in this group interview seemed hesitant to share the information on Damian with me, their strategy of saying 'how shall I say it ... I don't know if I can say it' effectively made sure others' whispering stopped and everyone listened carefully to what Paul had to say. In their description of Damian, the boys draw upon the idea of sexuality as conceptualized in stages ('being further') that are related to age ('he behaves much older'). Also, linking sexuality,

smoking and driving a scooter, they conclude: 'he will end up badly', making clear that while they are interested in his actions, they are different 'kinds' of boys.

### **Teaching relationships: drawing in or excluding gender and heterosexuality**

Although most analyses of sexuality and gender have focused on pupils, teachers are by no means exempt from the workings of these categories. Francis and Skelton (2001) argue that teachers construct gendered identities in the classroom, showing how masculinity is constructed through disciplining pupils and through their relations with pupils, sometimes disciplining boys by questioning their masculinity. Male teachers, they continue, use their relations with pupils to confirm their own masculinity, by 'positioning themselves as "one of the lads" with the boys in the class' or by 'positioning themselves as "other" to girls, non-masculine boys, and all things feminine' (Francis & Skelton, 2001, p. 14). As opposed to studies indicating that sexuality is explicitly kept 'outside' of the classroom (for example Allen, 2007), teachers as well as pupils in the two pre-vocational schools that I studied often actively drew sexuality into teaching practices and relations to establish an amicable bond, or to draw attention to the educational materials, as the following examples of each school will show.

To celebrate the end of the school year at Rijnsbergcollege, the entire class went out for dinner at the local Chinese restaurant (except for Roberto who, to increase his muscle mass, followed a strict diet which the restaurant buffet did not accommodate).

When most of the pupils have left, I change seats to the middle of the table, joining some teachers and pupils in a conversation on 'players'.<sup>45</sup> One of the teachers, Simon, while looking at Damian,

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<sup>45</sup> The word player is used to refer to 'tough' boys who have a lot of girlfriends and who are interested in sexual relations rather than love. For girls, the term used to refer to this is 'slut', a word with more negative connotations, see also Naezer (2006).

says: 'I think there is just one player here'. Damian recounts proudly that he 'first' had [a relationship] with Esmee. Then with Tamara. Then with Evy. And then again with Esmee'. He smiles. One of the teachers, Bas, asks: 'Who is the one who breaks up?' Damian answers proudly: 'It's always me!' Damian's friend Justin adds: 'Esmee, you know the one with the snake movements from that nude clip'. The others at the table nod to indicate their recognition of the girl and the clip.

After dinner, the conversation among the men and boys present turned to the sexual relationships of Damian. This collective enactment of masculinity provided a way for the teachers to build rapport with their male students and to cross generational boundaries (Pascoe, 2007). This way of relating through asking about girlfriends and 'being a player' strengthened the relationship between Simon and Damian, highlighting and confirming a particular hegemonic form of masculinity that united these boys and men in opposition to women and girls. Girls were seen here only in relation to having romantic/sexual relations with Damian, most pronounced when Esmee was mentioned: she was referred to as the one who had danced in her bedroom naked, captured on a webcam, the clip of which had spread throughout the school. The female teachers and pupils who were still sitting at the table were listening, not actively joining the conversation. In a context of recurring debates in the Netherlands (as well as internationally) on the 'feminization of education' – a process said to result in a lack of male role models (Acker, 1995; Martino, 2008) and considered to be the cause of a multitude of boys' problems (Acker, 1995; Driessen & van Langen, 2013; Foster, Kimmel, & Skelton, 2001; Ringrose, 2013; Timmerman, 2011; Van Essen, 1999) – it is interesting to note the active masculinization of the relation between teachers and pupils that leaves the women and girls at the table in a position of audience.

The practice of drawing on sexuality to establish a cordial relationship with a pupil also took place inside of classrooms. Consider the following field note.

Daya notified class teacher Mascha as soon as she walked into the classroom at Nexus High: 'Miss, your tights are damaged!'. Mascha replies: 'I know, thanks hun'. The class, consisting of 14 pupils, will be working individually on a number of tasks during today's class. Intern Nathalie walks around the classroom to assist pupils where needed. When Nathalie arrives with the girls who sit in front of me she teasingly says to one of them: 'I have a boy in my other class that is into you'. A back and forth in which Daya tries to find out who it is follows. Nathalie does not want to tell, and Daya gives up, saying, 'Well, I just hope it is not a tata'.<sup>46</sup> Ignoring the remark, Nathalie smilingly asks about the assignment Daya is working on.

Through attention to clothes and confiding information about the (possible) sexual interest of boys, a shared identity as (heterosexual) women is established. It works to decrease the power and age imbalance that exists between teachers (or interns) and pupils and is strategically used by Nathalie to gain attention before asking about their assignment. In both instances, in the restaurant as well as the classroom, the opposition between teacher (adult, powerful) and pupil (child, submissive) is being reduced through establishing amicable relationships by drawing on heterosexuality.

At Bernarduslyceum, in the pre-university track, a different use of sexuality was at work. Here, when sexuality was invoked by teachers, it was often positioned as being at odds with academic achievements. This becomes clear when we look at the ways in which teachers dealt with the brushing of hair, a common practice by many girls in the schools studied, as the most popular hairstyle for girls during the time of this study was long and straight.

A group of girls at Bernarduslyceum seemed very invested in their appearance: at the start of almost every class, when the pupils

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<sup>46</sup> Tata is a derogatory term derived from 'potato', postulated as the defining food for Dutchmen, and is used in slang to indicate Dutch descent.

were finding their place, settling in, and the teacher was setting up to start the class, girls checked their hair and make-up. Often a quick glance in the mirror (or in the selfiemode camera of their phone) and a few rearrangements of hair and re-application of lip balm were made. In the morning though, after arriving to school by bike, hair brushing was more common. The teacher of music and arts was annoyed, as his class was the first each Tuesday morning, and each time an argument between him and Diana and her friends ensued over the hair brushing. One time, the teacher took away Diana's hairbrush, under large protest of her and her friends. She was to pick it up later at the school's reception desk, a place where pupils mostly came when they were in trouble, and where they would rather not be seen. Diana waited nervously with her best friend and was handed her hairbrush after she promised to go and see the music and arts teacher to be informed about her sanction.

As opposed to the interventions by this Bernarduslyceum teacher, most of the short instances of hair brushing were hardly noticed or penalized by teachers at Nexus High and Rijnsbergcollege. There, being occupied with one's appearance was not seen as an interruption of the teaching process, or regarded as being at odds with academic achievement. When Diana was discussed in the teacher meeting at Bernarduslyceum, one of her teachers remarked, 'She is more a havo [general higher education track] pupil: she invests more in her looks than in her homework'. Others nodded in agreement, opposing looks with academic achievement, and situating Diana as out of place in the pre-university track. During the same meeting, when Lisa's disappointing grades were discussed, one teacher remarked: 'She is already occupied with boys'. In the same meeting, when discussing Bas, one of the teachers urged her colleagues to help in 'protecting Bas against the girls who fancy him', as she feared he could not deal with the attention and it would keep him from paying attention in class. The advice was followed when, not much later at the beginning of a history class, teacher Emmen asked Bas to turn around in his seat: 'Bas, I know you are a real chick magnet

and all the girls want your attention, but I want to start class now'. In an interesting reversal of gendered stereotypes, female sexuality is presented here as predatory, as something that boys should be protected against.

These field notes show three different ways in which heterosexuality functioned in pupil-teacher relations and teaching practices: it was drawn upon to find common ground or similarities; to grab the attention of a pupil before going into a class assignment; or to assist in the estimation of someone's academic potential.

### **Discussion: heteronormative by default?**

The current analysis started with taking up the suggestion that heteronormativity might not only regulate gendered and sexual identity constitution but works on other domains of social life as well (Jackson, 2006), domains that are often seen as asexual, such as those of friendship and pedagogy. A second point of departure was the 'un-believing' of the heterosexual matrix (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009) as 'just the way things are' in secondary schools. Instead of starting from the assumption that schools are heteronormative a priori, it traced the workings of heteronormativity in the making. To engage with these issues, the paper highlighted the ways in which heteronormativity is enacted through friendship and teaching practices in and around secondary schools.

The vignettes on friendship did not illustrate attempts of youth to come across convincingly as heterosexual (see for example Renold & Allan 2006), but instead showed ways in which killing time, overcoming boredom, being together, strengthening or discontinuing friendships were produced through heterosexuality, and at the same time, through these iterations, constituted heterosexuality as normative. It is possible to read the current analysis as an argument in support of the all-encompassing pervasiveness of 'the' heteronorm. However, I want to suggest it should be read as a warning against the tendency to unitize heteronormativity: as we have seen, norms of heterosexuality do not appear the same in each friendship group all the time, or in each school, and could create different effects in different

situations. The vignettes support an understanding of heteronormativity as relational and situational: friendship practices such as watching six-packs were a means of ‘consolidating friendships rather than performing coherent identities’ (Atkinson & DePalma, 2009, p. 80). In other words, the heterosexual practice of boy-watching enabled the friendship among girls to consolidate, and in turn instituted heterosexuality as the norm. In addition, friendships could be hampered by expressions of sexuality that did not fit that of the friendship group. In describing these different effects, the analysis supports arguments that question the singularity of heteronormativity and the heterosexual matrix (Mak, 2015).

Overall, studies of gender and sexuality in schools tend to focus on the (re)production of dominant discourses and the (un)availability of subject positions that are the consequence thereof (Dalley & Campbell, 2006; Renold, 2006b; Ryan, 2016). In this line of theorizing there is a clear directionality from power to subject identity, a directionality in which there might not always be room for instability and in which relationality is seen as in service of individual identity (see also Spronk, 2014). Importantly, the argument in this chapter is not one of denial of the realness of the phenomenon heteronormativity, but is instead that the phenomenon is partly brought into being through social analysis (see Law & Urry, 2004). Doing so would locate it firmly in schools as an all-encompassing force that results in individual identity performances that either confirm or disrupt this norm (Butler, 2006). Highlighting relationality instead, made it possible to understand heteronormativity as produced through and productive of relations such as friendship. The findings suggest that ‘skepticism about heteronormativity’s unity and stability is more useful than criticizing it as a grid of “intelligibility” that makes certain lives “unlivable”’ (Mak, 2015, p. 403). Instead of understanding heteronormativity as an invisible structuring force, this chapter argues that it should be understood as produced in and productive of friendship and teaching practices.

Though most studies interested in sexuality and schooling focus on youth, this chapter showed that teachers in the pre-vocational schools also relied on heterosexuality to establish common ground between themselves and their pupils, to retain attention, and sometimes to make abstract

knowledge relevant to pupils' lives. In both pre-vocational schools studied, sexuality was invoked by teachers, such as in the dinner conversation with Damian, or by the intern Nathalie. In the pre-university school though, sexuality was seen as a threat to academic achievements. In practice this difference meant that much more talk about sexuality was allowed and invited in the pre-vocational schools, whereas it was seen as inappropriate, and therefore silenced, in the pre-university track. Understanding this mechanism is important, especially in the Dutch case with its early differentiation of educational levels. The way in which sexuality was used in contrasting ways in the schools studied here, exemplifies a particular way of reinforcing the mind-body distinction that is implicit in the division of educational levels (Van Daalen, 2010) that are often regarded as important markers of social hierarchy and class position in the Netherlands (Eijk, 2011). This distinction was also evident in the amount of time that was allowed for social interactions. At Bernarduslyceum, the school was more often a pedagogic space than at Rijnsbergcollege or Nexus High, where the school was more often practiced as a space for the formation of social relationships and social learning, and where mundane actions like hair brushing or applying lip balm were rarely seen as disruptive.

Studying various schools alerts us to the risks of reifying not just heteronormativity but 'school' as well: each school dealt with sexuality differently, despite being situated in the same national context. The differences found might be related to the size of schools, their educational levels and subsequent differences in the understanding of the task that the school is to fulfil, or to variations in school environment and regulations (Sandfort et al., 2010). There has been very little effort to reflect upon precisely how such differences take shape and these issues warrant further study. The observations point us to question the differences found without directly relating them to the educational level or class background of pupils, a move which tends to naturalize classed differences in sexuality (Bettie, 2003). Contrasting approaches are relatively rare in ethnographic studies of schools, although they can be considered important in breaking with the tendency to produce singular accounts of heteronormativity (or the 'school').

## Conclusion

This chapter attended to the ways in which heteronormativity is made relevant in secondary schools. Moving away from a focus on gendered and sexual identity constructions or performances, it argued that heteronormativity is drawn on in mundane practices of relating in schools.

Understanding heteronormativity's effects in and emergence through practices of forming, consolidating or breaking friendships, and the pleasures that can be derived from it, indicates the pervasiveness of the norm in realms of social life that are often desexualized. With regard to the relations between teachers and pupils, the findings show that the ways in which heteronormativity was constituted is not universal: in two schools heterosexuality was 'drawn in' to ease teaching relations or establish a common ground between teachers and pupils, whereas at a third school (hetero)sexuality was seen as being at odds with academic achievements and therefore relegated to the private sphere. From this analysis it follows that challenging heteronormativity requires looking at the ways in which it is productive of social relations such as friendships.

The current analysis complicates interventions around non-normative sexual identities. These interventions often focus on accepting or respecting differences. However, coming out of the closet becomes a lot harder when friendships are built around heterosexuality: it means that a fear of exclusion or bullying based on sexual identity might not be the main issue, but that instead it is an impossibility of participating in friendship practices that might be harder to overcome.

Through its centrality to mundane practices of relating among friends and between pupils and teachers in schools, heterosexuality is iterated and reinstated as normative. By analysing friendship and teaching relations through the lens of heteronormativity, this article has pointed our attention in three directions for further inquiry. The first is the importance of understanding heteronormativity as productive of relations in schools. The second is the destabilizing of heteronormativity: when is it drawn upon, and in what ways? Lastly, the approach of studying multiple contexts can show the different effects of heteronormativity in different environments. Together, these observations urge us to not reify the school or the phenomenon of heteronormativity.