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What else can sex education do? Logics and effects in classroom practices

Sexualities

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sex**Willemijn Krebbekx**

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Abstract

Comprehensive sex education (CSE) has been heralded as effective in promoting sexually healthy behaviour in youth. At the same time, it has also been countered by critique, indicating that CSE is not a neutral vehicle for the transmission of knowledge. To think sex education outside this opposition of health intervention and critique, this article asks: What else can sex education do? Three ethnographic cases from secondary schools in the Netherlands showed the school to be a space/time for sexuality, showed how sexual knowledge is produced and used in class, and how sex education plays into and depends on processes of (gendered) popularity. In addition, the analysis pointed to the ways in which comprehensive sex education in practice (re)produces ethnic characterizations of sexuality. Finally, the analysis of sex education in practice complicated the ways in which sex education is conceptualized and measured as a health intervention.

Keywords

Netherlands, race, school, sex education, youth

Introduction

In academic debates on sex education, an important opposition has arisen between those that regard sex education as a health intervention (Schaalma et al., 2004), and those that counter the depoliticized rhetoric of health (Bay-Cheng, 2017). This article contributes to understanding sexuality education beyond health effects or critique, through exploring sex education in school spaces. It does so through

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analysing sex education in practice in classrooms, in the Netherlands, a country that is often ascribed a guiding role in issues of youth sexuality (Naezer et al., 2017). The analysis will be guided by the question ‘what else can sex education do?’ Before this question can be posed, I will introduce the two main engagements with sexuality education, namely through health promotion and through critical sexuality studies. I will continue to introduce the ethnographic fieldwork on which this article is based. Based on three vignettes, I will argue that sexuality is collectively enacted, instead of individually embodied.

Sex education as health intervention

Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is said to be ‘one of the most important tools to ensure that young people have the information they need to make healthy and informed choices’ (Parker et al., 2009: 227), because through CSE, young people ‘can be enabled to make decisions by themselves’ (Braeken and Cardinal, 2008: 57). CSE represents a rationalized, scientific approach that steers away from the explicitly moral messages of abstinence-only education (Lamb, 2013; Rasmussen, 2012).

In academic literature that supports school-based sex education, adolescence is presented as the main stage of sexual development (Lesko, 2001). It is the time in which healthy habits in regards to sexuality are formed, and therefore, from a health education perspective, the time to deliver sexual health interventions (Schaalma et al., 2004). In this life stage, beginning to engage in sexual activity is considered to be normal in the Netherlands (Schalet, 2011), adolescents are seen to be at risk of several negative influences. These risks are mainly silence about sexuality by parents (Smerecnik et al., 2010), peer pressure (Bay-Cheng, 2017), the internet and media more generally, and hormones (that cause changes in body and brain).

The theoretical underpinnings of this type of sex education, that derive from social psychology (Ferguson et al., 2008; Miedema et al., 2011; Schaalma et al., 2004), also guide effectiveness studies on knowledge, attitudes and intentions for behaviour (Schutte et al., 2014; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2015). To reduce sexual risk behaviour (Shoveller and Johnson, 2006), sex education strives for rational individuals who can talk openly about sex, know its scientific facts and have the social skills to act upon this knowledge and to resist peer pressure (Schaalma et al., 2004). This is what, in this article, I call sex education logic.

Critical constructivist studies of sex education

Critical sexuality education studies (McClelland and Fine, 2017) highlight how school-based sex education is not a neutral vehicle of knowledge transmission. It critiques sex education logic, highlighting the individualistic, neoliberal approach to sexuality that it relies on (Bay-Cheng, 2017), which comes at the cost of attention to power differences, sexual agency and sexual pleasure (among others:

Bay-Cheng, 2003; Holland et al., 2004). Pointing at the ways in which sexuality intersects with issues of gender, class/education, ethnicity and race, studies have uncovered values and norms that might implicitly be communicated in sexuality education. They deconstruct hegemonic gender structures (Sanjakdar et al., 2015) and racialized knowledges (Bredstrom, 2005; Quinlivan, 2017) that shape sex education curricula, uncover ‘hidden lessons’ of the curriculum (Fields, 2008), or ‘make visible’ how heterosexual structures influence classroom interaction (Ryan, 2016).

There has not been much crossover between these two strands of sex education research: they operate in different realms of knowledge production. A notable exception is the issue of pleasure. Since Michelle Fine’s seminal article on the missing discourse of desire (Fine, 1988), a large number of studies have focused on and argued for the inclusion of pleasure in sex education (see for example Allen et al., 2014). These calls resulted in a move away from a narrow ‘risk’ approach in some CSE programmes, to include sex as pleasurable, though often as an individualized imperative (Lamb et al., 2013).

Sex education in practice

While it is undoubtedly important to attend to sexual health, and to critically engage with the ways in which sexuality is represented in and through sex education curricula, a lot of weight is given to the intervention that is called sex education. Both strands of studying sex education display a different version of good sex education, understood in different terms and operating in different scientific repertoires. Both know what to look for (e.g. determinants, bias) and how to judge it (e.g. in terms of health effects or normativity). In this article, I would like to pause this evaluative mode of studying sex education, and explore other ways to think with sex education.

This move to think ‘more’ has also been proposed by recent studies in which sexuality is not considered to be an individual construction triggered by adolescence (Renold, 2005), nor as entirely discursively constructed (Ringrose, 2011), but as having ‘everything to do with how bodies, things, ideas and social institutions assemble’ (Fox and Alldred, 2015: 909). These studies draw attention to the physical spaces where youth interact and to the ways in which femininity and masculinity are always ‘becoming’ (Renold and Ringrose, 2011). These becomings are conceptualized not as residing inside the individual body, but as ‘effects of bodily relations or linkages, comprised from a range of material or non-material domains’ (Holford et al., 2013: 714). In analysing sex education, I take my inspiration from this recent body of literature and the questions it puts forth on the relationality of sexuality.

Here, I would like to look at sex education, not as a means to an end (health effects, the formation of sexual identities, gaining knowledge), or as a policing practice, but as a practice of relating. In the logic of sex education, research focuses on attitudes and behavioural intentions through individually administered survey research. In the mode of critique, research often consists of discourse analysis of

policy texts, curricula, or pupil talk. To study sex education as a practice of relating, I draw on ethnography, since it allows for an understanding of interaction and classroom practice. This means that I do not intend to isolate the object of research (sex education) to the practice in which it is enacted. As Mol (2002) argues, the bracketing of the practice is impossible: it is through practice that the object emerges. Here, I am interested in the ‘other’ things that sex education does – other than sorting individual health effects, or instituting normative sexualities. This means attending to the ‘empirical mess’ (Law, 2009) that ethnographic accounts produce. It also means resisting the application of frameworks that are put forth by sex education logics and those by critical constructivist studies. This is not to disregard these explanations and theories, but to understand how they might ‘become effects rather than explanatory foundations’ (Law, 2009). Attending to practices offers a way out of the evaluative modes described, as demonstrated by previous studies into care practices, another domain in which strong opinions prevail on what is ‘good’ (see for example Mol, 2008; Vogel 2016; Driessen, 2018). As will become clear, a focus on practices leads to foregrounding issues and processes that may otherwise be overlooked.

Methods and cases

This article is based on an ethnographic study into sexuality and diversity in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, the management of teenage sexuality was passed over by the government to professionals in the field, who are expected to base their work on ‘scientific evidence alone’ (Lewis and Knijn, 2002: 675). This approach, referred to as a Dutch tradition of the normalization of adolescent sexuality (Schalet, 2004) is seen as realistic and neutral, connected to science and facts, whereas morality is connected to religion and beliefs (Bang Svendsen, 2017; Rasmussen, 2015; Schalet, 2011). Whereas the government sets a so-called ‘attainment target’, stating in general terms what pupils should know about sexuality by the end of secondary school, the way in which this goal is reached is up to individual schools. As such, sexuality could be included in primary and secondary school curricula without much political turmoil.

The vignettes that I will present derive from fieldwork in two secondary schools in the Netherlands. In the first school, Florius College, one of the teachers invited me to take part in the sex education lessons that she offered on Friday afternoons during a period of four months. I participated in the elaborate sessions which were based on the curriculum *Long Live Love* (Long Live Love, 2012) and supplemented with fieldtrips and guest lectures. Teacher Anneloes, at Florius College, was very dedicated to the issue of sexuality education. She was the only teacher who gave extensive time to the issue in her school. She devoted 12 (instead of six) lessons to the programme, as she doubted whether ‘these pupils’ – referring to the ethnic minority background of almost all of the pupils – received any sex education at home. Her concern plays into larger concerns in the Netherlands about the sexual practices and sexual health of ethnic minority youth. Florius College is situated in

a large city in the Netherlands, in a neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city. The class that I followed consisted of 18 pupils between the ages of 14 and 17. The teacher introduced me as a researcher interested in sexuality, and an ‘assistant’ during the course. She would sometimes turn to me to ask for examples to illustrate certain issues, as well as to help out in managing the classroom: arranging seating, distributing materials, guiding half of the class during a field trip. Pupils mostly referred to me as an intern: I resembled the young, mostly female, mostly white, interns that they were used to seeing in their classrooms from time to time.

At the second school, Rijnsbergcollege, a small school for vocational education that is situated in a more rural area, my presence was more substantial and intensive. In this school, I took part in regular school days for 15 months. The school is relatively small, with about 300 pupils. Most of them lived in one of the five villages surrounding the school. Almost all pupils could be described as children of working-class parents and the school regularly emphasized its whiteness in relation to neighbouring schools and especially as opposed to schools in the Randstad. The 27 pupils that formed the class that I studied were 13–14 years old at the time of the study. During this period, I observed several sex education lessons. Here, I was known as the ‘person who is writing a book about our school lives’ and who would just ‘tag on’. The pupils were used to my presence in and around school by the time that the sex education classes took place.

Three cases will be presented to grasp what sex education in practice can entail. Each case, to a different extent, allows us to reflect on the guiding question throughout this article: What (else) can sex education do? The first case alerts us to the ways in which spaces and times of learning about, and spaces and times of doing sexuality are intertwined. The second case, which describes a class in which pupils are invited to ask questions about sexuality, shows that these questions serve purposes other than health, and that learning about sexuality is not restricted to the sex education classroom. Third, the analysis of a game intended to teach pupils about the transmission of HIV, brings to the fore the ways in which sexuality is collectively enacted.

1. Cuddling in class

Teacher Anneloes was worried about false information received through peers or the internet. In line with sex education logics, she constructed the sex education class as a ‘space of truth’ (Preston, 2016), a truth provided by the teacher that counters the assumed neglect of the topic by parents and the wrong kind of information found online and obtained through peers. The *Long Live Love* curriculum was used as a guideline, but Anneloes highlighted topics she deemed important for her group, such as virginity and homosexuality. In addition, she filled a drawer in her classroom with condoms that pupils of the entire school could take for free and without having to ask her.

Sitting in a circle had become the common set-up for the sex education class, and during one class, after everyone had found their seat, Anneloes asked the

pupils to share their experiences of relationships. Some pupils started to point at Imane and yelled her name – indicating her as the one experienced with romantic and sexual relationships. Anneloes declared this pointing to be against the ‘rules of the class’ that were agreed upon, before she turned to Imane to ask if she wanted to react. She agreed to talk about having had a boyfriend, how they met (at school), flirted (via Whatsapp), dated (a walk in the park), and fell in love. But, she quickly added that that is over now.

Anneloes: . . . how did you break up?

Imane (giggling): We broke up because of that disco-party that you organized.

Anneloes: Oh, really? What happened?

Imane: I did not want to go there and he [boyfriend] did. And then at the party he made out with others.

Classmate: yes, a real Mocro! [followed by laughter in the class].

Anneloes: Was it a Moroccan boy?

Imane: Yes.

Classmate: Real Mocro, told you! [Laughter].

Anneloes (sarcastically): Yes because all Moroccans cheat, don’t they? Really mature to say such things, that does not make any sense! Imane is telling us from her own experiences so we listen to her with respect. [turning to Imane] So he cheated on you? How did you find out, how did it make you feel, and what did you do?

Imane: Yes I heard it from others and it made me feel sad. So I asked him about it and he was acting vague. I knew enough and so we broke up.

Anneloes: And now, are you in love now?

Fabius, who has been sitting next to Imane pulls her towards him in a hug. Imane buries her head in her arms, on Fabius’ chest. They have been sitting close to each other the entire class and Imane has had one leg over his leg. Others point at them and make signs of hearts with their hands.

Still half-embraced by Fabius, Imane answers giggling: No, I am not in love at the moment.

I want to foreground three issues in this vignette. The first regards spatiality and sexuality. The set-up of the class was unusual: other classes took place in a different configuration, namely rows of desks and two by two, a spatial division that clearly institutes the teacher as the centre of attention and as the only one in the classroom with private space (Nespor, 1997). The start of the sex education class involved changing this. It symbolized the teaching philosophy of Anneloes: this was going to be a conversation, a sharing of knowledge, and a process of learning from each other. At the same time, however, Anneloes ultimately decided what kind of knowledge was important for the pupils in class, for example when she kept probing Imane to share more details, although the educational message of the relationship history was not entirely clear.

The second issue points to the notion of sexual trajectories and the timing of sexual activity. Characterizations of youth sexual experiences in terms of their sexual

debut (De Graaf et al., 2010; Van de Bongardt et al., 2014; Wolfers et al., 2010), sexual trajectory (Janssen, 2008; Nikken and De Graaf, 2012) and sexual career (Bakker et al., 2009; De Graaf et al., 2005), support a developmental, linear temporality. This linear order in health-behaviour theorizing ‘conceives of various psychological determinants, potentially modified by social norms and triggered by environment cues, which then determine someone’s behaviour’ (Cohen, 2014: 159).

This logic separates the presence of gaining sexual knowledge in class from the future of sexual behaviour in private spaces. In practice, however, school itself was a space/time for sexuality: for cuddling in class, for ‘making out with others’ during a school party. This resonates with ethnographies that describe the school as a space where sexuality is performed, played out, and made (Pascoe, 2007; Ringrose, 2013).¹ In class, while attention was on verbal articulations of relationships, the bodily relations that Imane and Fabius engaged in were not brought into speech. They signalled a form of intimacy taking place in school, and it was the sex education class that allowed for these bodily connections and communications.

Finally, ethnicity is brought in as a relevant category. It was important in the amount of time devoted to sex education: here it meant that more time was taken to attend to sex education, based on the assumption that children with an ethnic minority background will not be educated on this issue by their parents (Schalet, 2011). It was also brought in by Imane’s classmate who wanted to know about the ethnic background of the boyfriend in the story. While teacher Anneloes dismissed the remark as stereotypical, the issue of ethnic background and the question as to whether cultural background influenced sexuality came up again and again. It shows how ‘culture’ has become a pressing concern for sex education in northern European countries (Bang Svendsen, 2017). This linking of culture and sexuality is well known in the Netherlands, where tolerance of homosexuality is seen as a hallmark of Dutchness, and was included in citizenship tests (Butler, 2009). Pupils at times resisted this coupling. In a later class of Anneloes, for example, an elaborate discussion on the hymen was met with the dismissive remark, ‘All that time to answer just one question. Tssss...’.

Returning to the central question on what else sex education can do, we learn from this case that while sex education logics imply a linear developmental logic, a focus on practice shows that sex education changes class spaces and pedagogic styles, confirms and contests ethnicized sexualities, and engages future and current sexual and romantic relationships, feelings and actions.

II. Asking questions

When discussing the issue of sex education, Hans, the biology teacher at Rijnsbergcollege, used the regular biology textbook, like most teachers in Dutch classrooms (Ohlrichs et al., 2013). Most importantly, he let pupils’ questions guide the class. Worried about the large amount of incorrect information that pupils find online, he took all these questions seriously. Again, the classroom is constructed as a space of truth, this time comprising the biology textbook and the knowledge of Hans

himself. In this case, sex education involves pupils asking questions and a teacher answering them. As opposed to the strategy of Anneloes, who explicitly said that pupils should learn from each other's experiences, Hans positioned himself as the one who was knowledgeable. He relied on his knowledge as a biology teacher and (sexually experienced) adult to answer their questions, explaining what they could come across later in their lives. Again, the teacher is seen as the one who embodies objective knowledge, as a neutral guide in the sexual development of youth. Hans considered it to be his role to provide 'the correct information'.² Here he reiterates sex education logic in which knowledge is one of the important determinants of behaviour change, leading to health(y choices). Pupils, however, used the knowledge that Hans wanted to transfer, and the space he offered to do so, differently.

We are sitting in the science classroom, but today the white lab coats stay on the coat rack. Pupils sit two by two, boys and girls paired up, separated by sinks and facing the teacher. The class discusses ways of preventing pregnancy, more specifically coitus interruptus, when the principal walks in to ask Hans something. When she walks in, Ryvano comments: 'Wow she looks tarted up'.

When she has left, Hans wants to continue the class and asks: 'Where were we?'

Alyssa answers quickly: 'We were busy with cumming!'

Pupils, teacher and ethnographer laugh in reaction to this well-timed joke. A bit later, Alyssa changes her tone to a more serious one: 'Can you get pregnant by giving someone a blow job?' When Hans answers elaborately, concluding in the negative, Alyssa turns to Zoe and says loud enough for the whole class to hear: 'Ooh, so you can just continue giving blow jobs!'

Alyssa's question about oral sex shows that what was at stake was not factual information transfer from teacher to pupil for future use. Instead, the answer was immediately related to the situation in which Zoe supposedly found herself, namely engaging in oral sex. Sex education was thus used to publicly 'out' someone as sexually active. At the same time, it positions Alyssa as close to Zoe, as she shows that they know about each other's sexual whereabouts. The sexual acts that they engaged in were collectively discussed, sometimes planned, and evaluated, in their group of friends, and this all took place within the school. It indicates that the school is a space of informal sexual learning (Kehily, 2001), for the daily practices of 'doing sex' (Plummer, 2008). In a similar vein, Ryvano's comment about the head teacher's appearance ('She looks tarted up'), can be seen as a reaction to the 'feminine' topics of reproduction that were being discussed during this class especially, which featured a lengthy clip on the female reproductive cycle. Through humour, the sex education class was used to enact desirable, popular masculinities and femininities (Allen, 2014).

Later the same day, during engineering class, Zoe, Alyssa, Jordan and Kyra called me to their table. They asked me to explain what an orgasm is. Alyssa looked up the word on her smartphone. She kept her actions out of the teacher's sight, who had reminded them before, when they were cuddling while they were supposed

to sweep the floor, that the engineering class is not a place for intimacy (another word they asked me to explain). When Alyssa found an explanation about orgasm on *Wikipedia* she read it out, but could not pronounce the word clitoris – she seemed not to have heard it before. Jordan thought only boys could have an orgasm and was amazed to find out that girls can as well. She asked me twice to confirm that this information was correct, making sure I was not joking. This question on orgasms signals that the conversations in class sparked more questions on sexuality outside of the science classroom, where they relied on the textbook and the teacher. In the engineering classroom, the girls were relying on different sources of knowledge: *Wikipedia* and the ethnographer they had known for a few months. The Internet was not a risky source of knowledge, which is how it is conceptualized in sex education logic, but one of the information resources they drew on and verified, as the biology book could not answer this question on (female) sexual pleasure for them.

The mode of relying on pupils' questions took particular forms: of the principal's appearance, of preventing pregnancy, of making someone's sexual activities public. Later, in a different class, in a different group, and with different sources of information, answers to different questions would be sought. This case shows there is no one-way transfer of knowledge. Instead, what we see is that knowledge making and the challenging of knowledge was started in the science classroom, but continued outside the space/time of the official sex education class: this is what sex education does too.

III. The AIDS-cup-game

Following sex education logic, the development of individuality is an important task of adolescence (Lesko, 2001). Adolescents should learn to 'make their own choices', and to 'resist peer pressure' (Froyum, 2010; Lesko et al., 2010). Sex education should assist the individual adolescent in resisting peer pressure to engage in risky behaviours. 'Giving in' to peer pressure is often equated with an attempt to increase one's popularity. Attending to sex education in practice troubles these logics and shows that sex education does not (always) guard against, but participates in articulating and re-establishing popularity hierarchies among peers. Instead of building individual strength against negative peer influence, the case directs our attention to the effects of sex education for collectivity.

One morning at Rijnsbergcollege, Inge, the teacher, told me that class would be devoted to sexuality, as 'the class is going through adolescence'. She decided to play the AIDS-cup-game, a game that was developed in the 1990s to educate pupils about the transmission of the HIV-virus.

Inge fills cups with water and puts them on a tray when the pupils enter the room and find a seat. The classroom is organized into groups, about four or five pupils sit together. Tessa, Alyssa, Kira and Jordan add a chair to their group of tables and order me to sit with them. They compare old pictures of themselves on their

smartphones. Tessa scrolls through hers and says, to no one in particular: 'When I do not wear a bra and I am standing in front of the mirror they [her breasts] look less big'. There is no verbal response, but eyes go around the table, chest height. Inge invites each pupil to take one cup, and to walk around the classroom. Pouring water into someone else's cup represents the exchange of bodily fluids when having sex. The water in one of the cups is 'infected' with sugar, symbolizing the HIV virus. The lesson is that anyone can be infected, as, in theory, the water of all participants tastes sweet at the end. But the pupils do not know this yet. After a few minutes of mingling, they sit down and take a sip from their cup. Inge asks them to raise their hand in case it tastes sweet, and reveals this means HIV-infection. All hands go up, except those of the girls at the front left group of tables. Jenna, Brianna, Mieke and Linda were the only ones in class who remained 'uninfected', and laughter resulted when their hands did not go up.

Sex education builds on pre-existing social networks in the classroom. As happened before during other classes, one group was collectively marked here as undesirable. Jayden verbalized this: 'Hahaha no one wanted to have sex with them!' The fact was, in a way, made evident by the chemical result of the game. Knowledge, here, was delegated to the taste buds, to the taste of sugar. Tasting sugar – or not – confirmed the division that existed in the class between those who were sexually active, and verbal about that, and those who were not, or hid this. After she concluded that the 'uninfected girls' did not play the game right, Inge moved to the next part of the class: teaching how to put a condom on correctly.³

The sex education game worked to reproduce existing popularity hierarchies in class, as no one wanted to play the game with the unpopular group of girls. While some pupils were 'having sex' with others, they dared to ask for that, others were told 'I am not having sex with you!' or did not want to, or did not dare to ask someone to exchange fluids. Instead of levelling, the game had a discriminating effect. The girls marked as undesirable only exchanged fluids ('had sex') with each other. This was out of the question for boys, who, when they would find themselves too close to another boy, shouted 'Yuck I am not gay!' and hurried to find the nearest girl to 'mix' with. As such, the game became a moment of producing heterosexual masculinity – using the gay epithet to distance themselves from unwanted forms of masculinity they perceived to be effeminate (Pascoe, 2007). Sex education then, does not arm youth against peer pressure, but can be seen as an important socializing mechanism (Ashcraft, 2008; Bay-Cheng, 2017).

The AIDS-cup-game taught as much about HIV prevention as it did about the connection between heterosexual desirability and popularity. Throughout the three cases, peers appear not as one large, risky influence, but as reflective, as asking questions of one another, as cuddling and comforting, as laughing at, ignoring, emphasizing or denying sexuality. Thus, answering what else sex education can do, here, shows that sexuality is collectively enacted, instead of individually embodied.

‘Including diversity in sex education’

In recent years, the denominator ‘comprehensive’ has increasingly been accompanied by the imperative to ‘include diversity’ in Dutch sex education and research. There has been a strong lobby to make teaching about diversity legally mandatory in secondary schools. This lobby turned out to be successful in 2012, when a national requirement for secondary schools was passed stating, ‘Pupils learn about similarities, differences and changes in culture and religion in the Netherlands . . . and learn to respect sexuality and diversity within society, including sexual diversity’ (Kamerbrief Kerndoelen, 2012:3). This requirement institutes homotolerance as an important objective – turning tolerance of homosexuality into a learning goal for pupils (Rothing, 2008).

To understand how this obligation to attend to diversity resonates with sex education practice, let us return to the first case in which Imane shared her relationship experiences in the class circle. When the ethnic signifier of ‘Mocro’ (Moroccan) was mobilized in relation to cheating, a widely circulating notion of threatening Arab masculinity was brought into the classroom (Bredstrom, 2005; Briggs, 2014; Hasinoff, 2014). The teacher, Anneloes, countered this generalization and denounced the connection between sexuality and ethnic groups as immature. At the same time, she regarded her pupils as being especially in need of sex education because of their ethnic background.

When teaching elaborately about the hymen, pupils contested the motivations of Anneloes. This was even more evident when discussing the issue of homosexuality, another ‘coercive concern’ for ethnic minority youth (Jaffe-Walter, 2016). When Anneloes asked in which countries homosexuality is illegal, most pupils shared what they knew about their countries of origin, such as Ghana and Egypt. Anneloes continued to tell the class that homosexuality exists even in countries where it is illegal, something the pupils found hard to believe. Emphasizing that the *Long Live Love* booklet presents the scientific facts, she pointed out it indicates that 5–6% of all people are homosexual. Someone corrected her and said: ‘But it says 5–6% of people *in the Netherlands!*’ The forceful negative reactions to homosexuality seemed to confirm the notion that sexual diversity and cultural diversity make a ‘difficult’ couple. However, this might as well be an effect of the class environment: rejecting homosexuality became a joyful process given the laughter that arose in challenging the teacher. It shows that essentialized versions of ethnicity and sexuality and contestations against these essentialisms co-exist. However, who essentializes or contests (teacher, pupil, booklet) differs.

The assumption that homosexuality is denounced by the ‘ethnic other’ is widespread, and implies, incorrectly, that those who are ‘autochthonous Dutch’,⁴ accept homosexuality without problems. To be Dutch is to subscribe automatically to sexually liberal values (Mepschen et al., 2010), whereas ethnic others are constructed as sexually risky (Krebbekx, Spronk, M’charek, 2017). Homosexuality is especially regarded as a difficult topic for discussion in multicultural classrooms (Bijster, 2016). While playing the AIDS-cup-game, at Rijnsbergcollege, which was described

to me as a 'white school', the gay-epithet was used by boys who found themselves close to each other. However, this did not become part of the teaching process, which might indicate that for 'autochthonous Dutch' boys, homonegativity is not taken seriously or worthy of correction, whereas it is emphasized for those who are regarded as ethnic others. This connection between ethnicity, religion and sexuality that has been termed sexularism (Scott, 2009), was an effect of the class practices in different ways. It was established by pupils, for example when using the word 'Mocro'; by teachers, through attending to the hymen; and through educational materials, such as the *Long Live Love* booklet that portrayed a girl who states that she will remain a virgin until marriage, 'because she is Muslim'. It could also result in an absence of sex education: a principal of a third school I studied told me that sex education was not a key focus as their school was not attended by many allochthonous pupils.

Asking 'what else does sex education do?' alerts us to the risk that sex education produces some of the tensions between sexuality and ethnicity that it seeks to reduce. Talking about sex is practised as a feature of Dutchness, and in the cases explored here this worked through emphasizing homonegativity for some, while ignoring it for others. Conflating Dutchness with liberal sexual morals, influenced what topics were taught to which pupils, how much time was devoted to it, and in which schools sex education was deemed important to begin with.

Conclusion: Intervening in theory through practice

The three cases presented in this article trouble some of the separations that sex education puts forth: between individual and peer group, between present and future sexual activity, and between learning and doing. They asked for a reconsideration of the relation between sexuality and ethnicity. One last issue that following sex education in practice brings up, is that the clear distinction between the individual and the social that sex education logic proposes, cannot be made. Pupils collectively learn how to do sexuality, ranging from where and how to talk and laugh about it, to the visualization of growing up based on pictures on their smartphone, to remarks on breast-size or (the absence of) sexual activity. In the logic of sex education, sexuality is individually embodied, set in motion by hormones that steer bodily changes. Studying sex education in practice foregrounds that sexuality is enacted through collective practices, and that this brings about social effects of popularity, ethnicity, gender.

Comprehensive sex education is not a fixed set of activities that is applied in the same way in different schools but appears as fragmented, recurring at different moments and places, with different sources of knowledge, on the initiative of different actors. In the cases explored, sex education led to pupils knowing which teachers to approach in case they needed confidential advice on issues related to sexuality, or when in need of condoms. It also led to conversations about female sexuality in the engineering classroom. How does this complicated 'intervention' relate to effectiveness studies? Measuring effectiveness asks us to make effects measurable – but the inability to separate what does and does not belong to an intervention should function as a warning to a too strong belief in evidence from

effectiveness studies (see Kok et al., 2012) and subsequent calls for further standardization of sex education practice. Results can be wrongly ascribed to an intervention (element) if we do not recognize these other things sex education sets in motion, the things that ‘come along’ (Mol, 2010: 256).

In this article, I attended to sex education and the effects it can have, the other things it can do – things other than a transfer of objective knowledge or reinstitution of normativities. I shared three cases that troubled the logics of sex education, in which adolescents are conceptualized as in need of knowledge to individually develop a healthy sexuality, which is threatened by the negative influence of peers. Rather than following this logic, or countering it through a mode of critique, I have studied sex education in practice. This article showed the school to be a space/time for sexuality, how sexual knowledge is produced and used in class, and how sex education plays into and depends on processes of (gendered) popularity. In addition, the analysis pointed to the ways in which comprehensive sex education either emphasizes or ignores issues such as homosexuality, virginity, and dialogue and thereby, as a sexual practice (Verkaaik and Spronk, 2011), (re)produces ethnic characterizations of sexuality. Finally, the analysis of sex education in practice complicated the ways in which sex education is conceptualized and measured as a health intervention. Throughout this article, sex education appeared as a range of different practices that were held together by the label ‘comprehensive sex education’. As schools, classrooms, pupils and sex education materials change from one place to another, so will sex education and its effects, but in each new constellation sex education will do ‘more’ and ‘other things’ than influence future individual health.

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Notes

1. This is not exclusive to the secondary school as sexuality does not suddenly appear during adolescence, but is articulated and shaped earlier (see for example Kuik, 2013; Renold, 2005; Ryan, 2016; Thorne, 1993).
2. The objective biological knowledge that he communicates, however, is the result of scientific practices, practices of fact-making that have been erased (Roberts, 2016). As a result of that, gendered stereotypes that produce biological ‘fairy tales’ such as that of the passive egg and the active sperm (Martin, 1991) go unchallenged and these were reiterated in the class film about reproduction.
3. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the schooling system in the Netherlands, it is important to note how it relates to sex education. At the vocational Rijnsbergcollege, Hans relied on questions, and Inge on games and condom practice, as they thought their pupils should do something practical instead of reading. Anneloes’ class was a higher general education class (havo), and relied more heavily on written text. In the pre-university level (vwo) school that I observed, school-based sex education was not regarded as important: pupils were expected to be able to find correct information elsewhere.

4. The term allochthonous is used to indicate those of non-Dutch birth or ancestry, whereas autochthonous is used for those of Netherlands birth and ancestry (see Essed and Nimako, 2006).

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