„I would always end up with some girl“. Are Icelandic upper secondary schools heterosexual?

During the last fifteen years the situation of queer individuals in Iceland has improved very much, making Iceland one of world’s most progressive country in this respect. Today queer individuals have the same legal and civil rights as heterosexuals and the general view of Icelanders is very positive towards sexual minorities. This view was reflected when Icelanders voted a lesbian as their prime minister in 2009. However, this development has not been felt as much within the educational system. The National curriculum and various school curricula do neither mention sexuality nor stress the inclusion and visibility of queer students. This discrepancy between the society in general and the schools when it comes to the rights and issues of queer students can best be explained by using Ferfolja’s (2007) and Robinson’s (2002) concept of hierarchy of differences. This means that inclusive actions and the rights of queer students are often put at the bottom of the agenda or are even non existing. This can be viewed as manifestations of heterosexism according to many scholars (see e.g. Epstein, 1997; Ferfolja, 2007).

The concept of heterosexism will be the main analytical concept of this lecture. Scholars that have used the concept in their research (Chesir-Teran, 2003; Chesir-Teran og Hughes, 2009; Temple, 2005) have applied the definitions of Friend (1998) and Pharr (2000). The latter stresses that heterosexism and its manifestations needs to be analyzed and studied within the context of institutions.

In the lecture we will discuss the concept of institutionalized heterosexism and use the definition of Pharr. We will present the first results of a study of institutionalized heterosexism in an Icelandic upper secondary school. We ask how to explain...
the experiences of queer students by looking at institutionalized heterosexism.

The main objectives are two: descriptive and emancipatory. These two objectives are interwoven in the sense that by describing and analyzing the manifestations of institutionalized heterosexism, we will give educators and policy makers a better understanding of its nature and what action could possibly be taken to reduce it. This knowledge can also be helpful to mark a policy within the educational system concerning the rights of queer students, making them more inclusive and visible in schools and curricula. In that way the study is emancipatory.

The results of the study should have interests outside of Iceland for at least three reasons: Firstly it should contribute to the growing body of research which focus on the issues of queer students, applying both critical and queer theory in their approach. Secondly its results could give teachers and policy makers in education indications of what could be expected in other European upper secondary schools when it comes to institutionalized heterosexism. Discrepancy in this respect between the society in general and the schools could stimulate further research with the aim of reducing the hierarchy of differences. Thirdly contradictions and mismathces in the Icelandic discourse are interesting from a policy perspective.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were taken with six former and current queer (LGBT) students from four upper secondary schools in Reykjavik. The interviewees were selected purposively with four criteria in mind: equal number of male and female participants; age, that is the participants should not be older than 25 years old; all the participants should have attended an upper secondary school for at least two years; school location, it should be located in Reykjavik.

The participants were asked to tell (narrate) about their school experiences, their interaction with faculty members and fellow students. The purpose of the interviews was to find out whether the participants had experienced heterosexisms and how they negotiated their existence in otherwise heterosexual school environment.

The interview data was divided into themes and then interpreted with the help of queer theory, which is both analytical and emancipatory (Jagose, 1996; Kirsch, 2000) and other studies on heterosexism within schools (e.g. Epstein, 1994; Ferfolja, 2007; Herek, 2004). The aim here was to find out whether we could explain the school experiences of the queer students interviewed by focusing on institutionalized heterosexism, i.e. was there something in the narrative of our participants that indicated their experiences of heterosexism.

Expected Outcomes

The results of our study indicate that institutionalized heterosexism prevails in the structure and culture of the four schools under investigation. Queer youth experience institutionalized heterosexism daily in their dealings with faculty and fellow students, for instance in lack of understanding, uncomfortable questions they are asked and heterosexual discourse. Possible explanations for this can be found in the low visibility of queer students and systematic exclusion and silencing, whether aware or unaware, of their issues and interests.

The results of the study also confirmed the discrepancy between the society in general and the schools (educational system) when it comes to visibility and rights of queer (LGBT) students. The experiences of the queer students interviewed indicated that inclusive actions and their rights were put at the bottom of the agenda or were even non existing in the schools under investigation. This manifested itself in limited discussion (information) about their needs/issues and that school authorities found it difficult to approach this matter in general. This hierarchy of differences concerning the issues of queer students, in the schools under investigation could be interpreted as manifestation of institutionalized heterosexism.

References


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