
Heteronormativity in school space in Finland

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During the first few weeks in a new school young people learn how they are supposed to behave. They learn time/space-paths, which indicate to school students where and when they have to be in a certain place and when they cannot be in that place (See Gordon et al. 2000 p. 148; 1999; 1996). It can take a great deal of energy to learn and understand the spatial praxis of a school, but quickly time /space-paths become routine and almost obvious to the students.

School architecture has been argued to resemble architecture of other public institutions such as prisons and hospitals (See Lönnqvist 1993 p. 136-137; Foucault 1984). The general construction of a typical Finnish secondary school classroom includes clear non-personal rows of desks, which do not openly express an array of differing personalities and changing feelings. Sometimes routines and obvious non-personal use of space is broken by unexpected behaviour or unusual practices, such as flowers in the classroom, or pictures and drawings on the walls that reflect student life. Typically, those are practices that students are likely to remember. In general, people learn to act in a certain or routinised manner in specific spaces. Those spaces activate learned feelings and memories that are linked to them (See Kosonen 1998 p. 51-58; Lefvebre 1991). Students are most likely to remember those spatial practices and situations that they either found very positive or very negative, or that were connected to feelings of safety (See Gordon et al. 2000 p. 145).

Stories of non-heterosexual students as starting point

I chose to interview non-heterosexual young people in my research on heteronormativity in school practices. My assumption was that non-heterosexual young people, as opposed to other young people, might have more experiences in which they may feel the pressure of heteronormativity or in which they might question such pressure. Semi-structured theme interviews function well as the method of collecting school experiences of non-heterosexual young people. I interviewed thirty non-heterosexual young people, all of whom except two were between the ages of fifteen and twenty. Sixteen of the interviewees were young

women and fourteen were young men. Nearly two thirds of them grew up in the metropolitan area of Helsinki, Finland, or in the vicinity. Some had lived part of their school years elsewhere. I contacted the interviewees mainly through the young people's groups and the information circulation of SETA, a Finnish National Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights Organization.

The memories conveyed during the interviews are reflections on earlier childhood classroom experiences, which therefore cannot be directly identified with the actual classroom situation. I analysed the interviews theme by theme with the intention of looking at practices in which heteronormativity is maintained or questioned. When I interpreted multi-layered and often contradictory memories of school experiences, I utilized as a starting point an assumption that heteronormativity is often simultaneously challenged as well as produced in the same situation.

Young people are active agents and without them there would be no culture within the school. The terms student and young person is here used instead of pupil and school children as these terms connote more independent and active individuals. In this way I want to emphasize the possibility of young people making choices at school; school space and its use is maintained, adopted and challenged both by students and teachers.

It is traditionally thought that people are either heterosexual or homosexual, and on occasion, individuals can be bisexual. This dichotomy, or trichotomy, is rather typically used as sexual orientation is currently tackled by the media and academic research and as relationships between people of the same sex are discussed by the legislature. According to heteronormative thinking, these heterosexual and homosexual categories can be seen as opposite and exclusive terms. Something in the gendered (biological) body or gender itself leads to a particular kind of desire – heterosexual or other (See Butler 1990). I strive to break the strengthening of the traditional homosexual and heterosexual categories by using the concepts of non-heterosexuality and heterosexuality in a non-exclusive and overlapping manner. I primarily use the concept of non-heterosexuality to describe people who have sexual feelings towards (including fantasies, dreams, hopes and wishes, crushes, and love) and /or sexual experiences with people of the same gender, and/or people who define themselves or their sexuality with terms that are, in our culture, connected with non-heterosexuality (for example, lesbian, bisexual, gay, homosexual). Likewise, in this article, heterosexuality is an adjective used to describe people who have sexual feelings towards and/or sexual experiences with people of a different gender, and /or those who define themselves or their sexuality with terms that, in our culture, are connected with heterosexuality (for example, heterosexual, bisexual, normal, ordinary, I am not gay).

Non-heterosexuality and heterosexuality are not exclusive concepts. In practice, they can be overlapping. Moreover, the concepts are not exhaustive, as a person can also be neither (see Lehtonen 2002; 1998). The starting point of this article is the understanding of sexuality – whether an individual is non-heterosexual and/or heterosexual – an idea that is continuously maintained and also under continuous change in society. This idea takes shape in present day cultural and social interactions by utilizing the groundwork of past social interaction. The sexuality of a young person is not a ready made package that she or he can absorb from the surrounding culture. Rather, it is a sum of different, often contradictory, parts, as well as the joining of some discourses and the absence of others. Young persons do not involuntarily assimilate the ideas and perspectives in which they are surrounded; they do not adopt particular discourses in a formulaic manner, as the outcome of their sexuality is affected by their feelings, acts, and overall understanding of their past experiences. The construction and maintenance of sexuality and gender is situational, and therefore, bound to time and place. The stability typical of sexuality and gender, or the socially constructed image of stability, is based on past experiences and continuous performative repetition in which “familiar” heteronormative ways of thinking – that are part of the culture – are cited. (See Lehtonen 2002; Butler 1990)

Gender and sexuality are constructed as a “stylisation” of the body, a set of repeated acts that are included in a rather unstable regulatory frame that, over time, as congealed produces the appearance of a substance, which presents itself as natural being (see Butler 1990 p. 33). To paraphrase, when people continuously repeat certain acts connected to their gender/sexuality, the image of a “right kind” of gender and sexuality, bound to the body, takes shape in the minds of people themselves and the ones with whom they interact (Lehtonen 2002). Uses of school space are directly connected to these performative acts, which when constantly repeated, create the ideas of gender and sexuality.

Where is my place in the gendered sitting order?

Both in the classroom as well as in the school restaurant, the creation of student sitting order includes similar social mechanisms: the building of hierarchies, the construction of gender difference and overall social sexualization. In Finnish primary schools, teachers often decide where students sit. In upper grades, students usually construct the sitting order themselves. Sitting order, like many other school practices, becomes routine after the first few days or weeks. When choosing their place in the sitting order, my interviewees told of a major interest in wanting to sit next their friends and avoiding “the trouble-makers.” At times, teachers try to separate “the trouble-makers” and sit them next to more quiet students. In practice, this often means that a loud boy is seated next to a

quiet girl (See Kasanen et al 2001 p. 213). Primary school teachers might situate students in boy-girl-pairs at two-person desks. The teacher often reasons that the boy's natural wildness will be controlled by the girl's natural peacefulness.

Typically, students can construct their own seating arrangement in the in upper grades. In most cases, girls choose to sit in the vicinity of other girls, sharing either two-person desks or closely situated one-person desks. The same is true for boys: they choose to sit either with or close to other boys. Often, classroom sitting order is highly gendered, where boys occupy one side of the classroom, and girls occupy the other (see also Kasanen et al 2001 p. 210f; Gordon et al. 2000 p. 146). More often, boys might choose to sit in the back of the classroom and let girls be under the eyes of the teacher. Niko told a different story:

Niko (16 years old boy): One thing is that there is an official control that boys sit in front of the class. Usually girls want to be there because they want to have good grades and they are active. But I guess we have a nice class where everybody wants good grades and to be active.

Jukka (interviewer): So boys took the best seats?

Niko: There is this problem that boys were not so clever. They had to take that this way.

Not all of the students accept the clearly gendered split in sitting order. Some boys sit in the girls groups and vice versa. Some were not teased about it, but some, like Joni, were bullied:

Joni (16 years old boy): Anyway, I do not have to hear what they are talking now. They do many childish things. This ruff group of boys is there behind and, I hate it, they start having these farting competitions and belching competitions, and they throw pieces of paper and rubber at the teacher as well as towards me.

There are hierarchies created within boy's groups as well as within girl's groups. These hierarchies are visible in sitting order patterns. Some students are treated as "left-overs". Boys and girls who do not act within gender norms are sometimes physically left outside of the circles of friends and groupings. Thus, these students are the last to choose seats in the classroom. This sometimes means that a boy has to sit next to a girl, possibly against his will, when there are no other seats available. As this seating arrangement can be socially non-normative in the classroom, like-gender is often seen a factor that forces boys to sit with each other even when no other factors would support it.

Veera (18 years old girl): In our class there were two boys who sit always close to each other.

Jukka: They were always next to each other?

Veera: Yes. Imagine, twenty two girls and two boys.

Jukka: Were they friends?

Veera: Under the circumstances, I guess they were not that close otherwise.

Some students voluntarily choose to break the normative gendered patterns, motivating them to choose their own gender group. Sitting next to a student of a different gender at a double desk could have many types of gendered and sexualised interpretations, whether the situation was voluntary or forced. For instance, other students might question the gender or sexual identity of the student in question (see also Gordon et al. 2000 p. 146). Boys can be called gay, and a girl's identity as a girl or a woman can be doubted. On the one hand, a boy's heterosexuality and masculinity can be challenged if he sits next to a girl. On the other hand, the relationship between a boy and a girl sitting together can be sexualised and therefore interpreted as a heterosexual relationship. The same situation is true for girls, yet girls may not be labelled lesbians as often as boys are labelled gay. If students are heterosexualised by sitting next to someone of a different gender, then boys can gain a reputation as being mature and a stallion, whereas girl can lose their positive reputation and their sexuality can be thought to be in someway immoral.

Sara (17 years old girl): I was quite a good friend with a boy and with him I was usually sitting in front of the class quite in the middle. It was often so that boys are on that side and girls on the other. And then there were two girls in the middle of the boys' side and they were man-eating types of girls. And there were two boys among the girls and they were womanisers.

Jukka: Sexuality was then in the picture?

Sara: We were then in the middle in a nice way ourselves.

Jukka: What did the other people think about your choice of sitting?

Sara: There was almost in the middle of the class that border [of genders] and we were then in the middle but on both sides.

Sara's friend, who was a boy, was sitting on the boys' side of the classroom, and Sara was sitting on the girl's side. Their position in the classroom seemed to be meaningful, and these positions were not much questioned even if they sat next to each other.

Similar patterns can also be found in the school restaurants. In this context, there is a larger number of girls and boys to carry out the daily task of sitting and organizing their school space. Usually hierarchies are then created not only by the popularity and gender of the student, but also by age: restaurant tables are usually taken over by gendered groups of the same age cohort.

One interviewee, Essi (18-year-old girl) suggested that "it is really interesting that boys and girls are avoiding each other in every situation in the school, you

sit separately and stay in your own groups, but anyway you still try to be so heterosexual". Homosociality, meaning the valued interaction between one's own gender group, is common in heteronormative school culture. Interaction between individuals of different gender groups can be (hetero)sexualised or questioned as an unwanted disturbance to homosociality. For both non-heterosexual and heterosexual students, the social interaction choices are the same. Maybe non-heterosexual students can be more active in questioning the boundaries if they do not agree with the gendered norms, but if they try to hide their non-heterosexuality, they might want to choose to act more strongly than others by following the heteronormative sitting order.

School toilets as public spaces

The school toilet is simultaneously a public and private place. The nature of the school toilet as a gendered and sexualised space is emphasized in my analysis. School toilets maintain and produce gender differentiation. It is not only a place to do your physical needs but it is also a place to meet other students and hang around with them. School toilets often include wall writings, which reflect a myriad of hierarchies (See Lahelma et al. 2000).

In Finland, there are typically quite large general school toilets containing a row of several small closets. These big toilets are usually gendered and the doors have signifiers for either women or men. Many interviewees said that they did not like to use the toilets at school because they found them to be too "public". Several students thought that it was too easy for others to see or to hear what they were doing. In some schools, toilets are not used very much. In other instances, students use certain school toilets that they feel are more "private". Nowadays it is more common to build new schools that utilize single-occupancy toilets. Even then, the doors often display signs for either women/girls or men/boys.

The image of boys' toilets and girls' toilets seem to be quite different. The interviewees said that boys' toilets were often broken and there was a fair amount of teasing and bullying in the toilet. On the other hand, in the girls toilets there were a lot of girls hanging around and talking to each other. For some students, the boys' toilet was a place to be frightened of and for other students, the girls' toilet was a place to meet friends.

Juho (20 years old boy): I always thought, where it is best to let myself be teased, so that the teachers will see. I always avoided places where it would be even dangerous to be teased. I never visited the school toilet, that was a very big one in which people smoked and beat each other. I never went into that but I used to go to the one next to the Art Class. The big one was ... like there was ten seats in line and a long urinal.

Mira (18 years old girl): It was sort of nice to visit them. I liked other girls in other classes as well and you could meet them while they went to do their make-up. Toilet lines were nice. I used to get along with other students very well.

Boys create hierarchies with masculinity in the school toilet by fighting and doing things that are not allowed. Students who do not take part in these processes were excluded and maybe even used as targets for other boys to display their masculinity (See Tolonen 1998). For girls, their toilets could be a specific and maybe safe “girls space”, but also a place to create heterosexual femininities by using and preparing make-up and practicing girlish talk about school, boys, make-up, etc. Not all students find these spaces attractive and they might feel themselves excluded from the school space. Girls’ toilets were not always harmonious places and Nadja told she was teased there by other girls.

Nadja (20 years old girl): I could not go to the toilet cause they brought me under the water pipe and threw things at me and pinched me and pushed me, shout and called me at names.

Teasing can be a common ritual for newcomers beginning the seventh grade at a new school. In Finland, students attend a comprehensive school, where they usually stay from the first to sixth grade in one building and then move to a new school building at seventh grade, when they are at about 13 years of age. This comprehensive school lasts three years, where students then proceed to either high school or vocational school. In some schools, seventh graders are routinely teased through mobbing rituals organized by older students. Quite often student’s stories reflect recurrent teasing in school toilets. Some victims of bullying took positively to this behaviour, and saw the harassment as a way to be included in school culture. For others, it was not taken so happily.

Usu (17 years old girl): I was taken to boys’ toilet and made totally wet with water... There were three girls of us whom the boys threw water at.

Jukka: What was the point, that they pushed you to the boys’ toilet? Was it because boys were teasing or that girls are taken to boys’ toilet?

Usu: Maybe it was just that girls are taken to boys’ toilet. Idea behind it was that there are girls and boys and that girls are interested in boys and opposite. So that it is an electric place. That it is connected to norms and that you are brought there and made wet.

Jukka: That is interesting. That it is a boys’ area and that girls are taken there.

Usu: I do not experience it that way. My identity is coming to this and I am not interested in boys at the moment. So it does not relieve anything for me.

In addition to being gendered, toilets are also sexualised as well as heterosexualised. When a girl enters the boys’ toilet, she is not only unconsciously

questioning the gender order of the school space, but she is also making the space and context heterosexual. The reverse is also true. Boys in the girls' toilet emphasize the sexual nature of the school toilet space. In contrast, boys and girls in their respective toilets typically display no sexual implication, and in turn the spaces are usually interpreted as asexual (See Pronger 1990 p. 194).

Yet students can have also sexual experiences even if they are in the toilets of their own gender. Sam (20) was asked to have sex with a boy at a school party.

Sam (20 years old boy): I knocked at the door but there was no answer. Then I went in. I saw a guy who was, I think drunk. I did not know what he was doing there. He just said, come and play. I said: what! To play. I am not a child, I cannot play. He said: adult play. I said I am not interested. Then I went away.

Sara (17) was meeting and hugging her girlfriend at a school toilet in the 9th grade, when she was 15 years old. Even if their behaviour occurred behind closed doors, it was controlled by other students.

Sara (17 years old girl): In the toilet somewhere in the 9th grade there was a graffiti on the wall: "Sara and [name of Sara's girlfriend], please, don't lick each other publicly. It makes us feel sick". Then someone had written under it: "What a racist you are! They can do what ever they like".

The cleaning personnel had taken the graffiti away soon after its appearance. In the graffiti there was a strong resistance against both Sara's same gender relationship as well as against aggressive control of such behaviour. The word racist was used most likely because the words heterosexist or heteronormative are not commonly known in the Finnish school cultures, especially at that age. In many schools, toilets are the most obvious and visibly gendered spaces where many hierarchies are created and heteronormative thinking is maintained and tested.

School space for non-heterosexual students

I have explored gendered and sexualised school space by focusing on sitting order in the classroom and school restaurant and on the use school toilet space. There are many other school spaces where gender and sexuality are prominent. For instance, many complex social interactions occur within school corridors and during school breaks. Moreover, shower rooms after Physical Education lessons as well as the lessons themselves provide an opportunity to study how students occupy their school space. I am also interested in embodiment issues, including how students walk, talk, sit, dress up and use their bodies. What hierarchies and boundaries are created and questioned by using body and space in various ways? Sets of routines and rules can differ amongst school systems,

classrooms, and individuals. Interpretation of school space experiences can also differ. Yet overall trends in the personal understanding of these incidences can shed light onto the powerful social structure that construct school culture.

In school culture everyone has the potential to maintain and question the use space, but some people have more powerful status than others because of their position in the school network. They can more easily question the hierarchies and boundaries of the school, and they possess more possibility to create new ones and test old ones. For many students, the risks for testing and questioning spatial school practices can be too high. They might lose friends or respect; they might be teased or called names. Even if the pervasive gendered and sexualised patterns seem to be fairly common in Finnish schools, there is always variation between schools, grades and classes.

Non-heterosexual youth are not usually left space on purpose. They have to interact with the rest of the student body in an often strictly heteronormative space, which makes them typically marginalized and encourages them to hide their feelings and sexuality. School space often enforces gendered groupings and sexualises the oppositional rooms and spaces of girls and boys, while concurrently discouraging sexual and loving emotional and physical interactions between persons of their same gender. These interactions can be prohibited by direct rules against particular behaviours, by violent control over them, or by silencing them under heterosexual obviousness.

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