

Chapter 17

Rainbow Paradise? Sexualities and Gender Diversity in Finnish Schools



Jukka Lehtonen

Abstract The Finnish education system, welfare state and Finland's position in respect to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) human rights have been praised. In this chapter, the utopian image of Finnish education system as a 'rainbow paradise' is questioned. Legislation, curricula, teachers, school textbooks, experiences of non-heterosexual, trans and intersex youth as well as LGBTI human rights organisations' work are discussed, as well as the influence of COVID-19. All are looked at from the viewpoint of heteronormativity. Even if there have been several advancements in acknowledging sexual and gender diversity within Finnish education, particularly in the area of legislation and educational policies, there are serious everyday problems in making schools safe for LGBTI students and teachers, as well as with treating everyone equally despite their sexual orientation and gender identity or expression. Teacher training, teaching and textbooks used in schools are often still heteronormative, and teachers lack tools and motivation in resisting heteronormative starting points in their work. Youth culture has changed in recent years, it has become more diverse and less judgemental towards LGBTI youth but non-heterosexual, trans and intersex students are still clearly experiencing more violence in schools than cisgender heterosexual students. The mainly heteronormative Finnish education system creates stress and mental health problems for LGBTI youth. Counselling and health care services are still not fully able to respond to their needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has only made the situation worse. In short, it will require a sustained effort to make the Finnish education system anything close to a 'rainbow paradise'.

Nordic countries, Finland including, have often been portrayed as a haven for gender equality and a model example of perfect sex education. In the ILGA-Europe survey, Finland ranks highly when comparing lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex (LGBTI) rights in Europe.¹ It has also had same-sex registered partnership legislation since 2002 and an equal marriage law since 2017. According to the results of

J. Lehtonen (✉)
Gender Studies, University of Helsinki, PL 59, 00014 Helsinki, Finland
e-mail: jukka.p.lehtonen@helsinki.fi

the European Social Survey data the majority of people in Finland take the view that lesbians and gays should be free to live their lives as they wish, and the proportion sharing this view has increased over the last two decades from over 60% to about 80%.² The results indicate that women, younger people, those who are religiously non-active and those with higher education have more accepting attitudes towards lesbians and gays than others. Similar patterns are common in attitudes towards gender diversity, even if trans and intersex issues are less well known. All of this, added to the generally favourable evaluation of the Finnish education system and Finnish teacher training, might lead people to think that schools in Finland are a safe haven for LGBTI students and teachers. Unfortunately, this is not the case in most schools. More often, equality and non-discrimination are true only in official documents and legislation, but rarely in the everyday levels of schooling.

In this chapter, I question the utopian image of Finnish education system as a 'rainbow paradise'. I look at the Finnish school from the perspective of sexual and gender diversity and heteronormativity. Heteronormativity refers to a way of thinking or reacting that refuses to see diversity in sexual orientation and gender, and that considers a particular way of expressing or experiencing gender and sexuality to be better than another. This includes normative heterosexuality and gender normativity, according to which only women and men are considered to exist in the world. Men are supposed to be masculine in the "right" way and women feminine in the "right" way. According to heteronormative thinking, gender groups are internally homogeneous and each other's opposites, and they are hierarchical in that men and maleness are considered more valuable than women and femaleness. The heterosexual maleness of men and the heterosexual femaleness of women are emphasised and are understood to have biological origins (cisnormativity).

This chapter draws on queer theory, particularly the work of Judith Butler, Kevin Kumashiro and Deborah Britzman, who emphasise the importance of challenging and transgressing heteronormativity; the binary construction of gender and sexuality; and opposition towards hegemonic regimes of gender and sexuality.³ Queer theory provides important analytic tools for making sense of gender and sexual justice in an educational context, particularly with respect to the impact and effects of institutionalised heteronormativity.⁴ Another viewpoint that is vital for this chapter is an understanding of intersectionality.⁵

I will focus here on legislation and core curricula documents, teachers and teacher training, teaching and textbooks, but also on the experiences of non-heterosexual, trans and intersex⁶ youth with respect to their schooling and to the educational outreach work of non-governmental organisations on LGBTI issues. With this analysis of the school system and its practices I will argue that there is still a long way to go before Finland could be called any kind of rainbow paradise.

The work builds on my long research experience and data collected from the last 30 years, including interviews, ethnographic data, documents, textbooks, and surveys. I draw also on a recent diversity and equality related research project WeAll.⁷ My focus is non-heterosexual and trans youth at work and in education. WeAll got additional funding to analyse the COVID-19 crises from the perspective of working

life. I have been studying LGBTI people over this time, and at the end of the chapter I discuss the influence of COVID-19 on schooling from an LGBTI perspective.

In this chapter, I focus first on legislation and policy documents, and on how they are enforced in educational institutions and practices. Then I analyse the topics from the youth perspective and ask how young people experience their schooling and peer group pressure. Third, I describe the educational outreach work of LGBTI organisations with schools and analyse the challenges in that work. Finally, I focus on COVID-19 and make some concluding remarks.

Recent Advancements in Finnish Legislation and Educational Policy Documents

Finland has legislation to criminalise discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression in the workplace, including educational institutions. Teachers or students are not allowed to be discriminated against based on sexuality or gender. Anti-discrimination law concerning working life was enacted as early as 1995 but has covered discrimination more broadly since 2004. The Equality and Non-Discrimination Act was renewed in 2014 and came into force in 2016 to strengthen equality and non-discrimination in education, workplaces and elsewhere. The framework of this renewed legislation covers trans and intersex people as well as sexual minorities.

Accordingly, all schools and educational institutions must have a plan to address gender equality and advance anti-discrimination measures. Equality and non-discriminatory measures, based on either gender or sexuality, should therefore be advanced at basic, upper secondary and tertiary educational levels. The current legislation does not yet cover early childhood education, but the current government has plans to include this level of education in the similar framework of demands. There are also plans to renew trans legislation, which would make it easier for people to undergo a gender-reassignment process, and prohibit unnecessary surgery for intersex children to make them fit into gender-binary system. The pandemic has postponed these changes.

For the first time in 2014, sexual orientation was included in the Finnish national core curriculum for basic education (children aged 7–16). This was an important step towards increasing LGBTI visibility in educational settings. The introduction to the core curricula document only mentions the word ‘sexual orientation’ once, as part of a listing of the prohibited reasons to discriminate against people on various grounds in the Finnish Constitution or anti-discrimination law.⁸ Adequate information on how to deal with issues of sexual orientation in education is not provided. The core curricula document does raise the anti-discrimination law as something that should be considered when planning education in schools.

Gender diversity is considered more, as the curriculum document states “basic education adds knowledge and understanding on gender diversity”,⁹ which is understood to mean that there should be some education on gender diversity issues in basic education. The document also mentions that during compulsory education “students’ understanding of their gender identity and sexuality develops, and along with its values and practices, the learning community advances gender equality, and supports students in constructing their identities”.¹⁰

The National Board of Education published a guidebook¹¹ in 2015 on how schools can advance gender equality and include gender diversity in compulsory education. The guidebook covers gender diversity issues progressively and mentions LGBT youth as a group vulnerable to bullying and harassment. No guidebook has yet been published by the Finnish Government specifically on sexual orientation issues.

Heteronormative Institutional Practices and Teaching

The rather progressive legislative and policy document changes around sexual and gender minority issues in Finland have not yet led to far-reaching or systematic changes in schools. Both primary and secondary education often lack coherent protection of LGBTI students. Despite the clearly stated law on equality and anti-discrimination planning having been in place for over 15 years, many upper secondary or higher educational institutions do not comply with the law and have not changed the relevant policies. In basic education, equality and anti-discrimination planning has been demanded since 2016, but a recent evaluation survey found serious problems with planning and with some schools not doing what was required.¹² Furthermore, schools are neither monitored nor held accountable by the government. Institutions with a plan do not necessarily formulate it satisfactorily, that is, by having all partners (teachers, staff members and students) involved in the formation of the policy.¹³ Often specific tasks and concrete changes related to sexual orientation or gender diversity are not included in planning, or the tasks planned are not carried out or followed up.

A key problem lies in the teacher education institutions in the universities. Only a few have compulsory courses or lectures on how to handle sexual and gender diversity issues within teaching and teachers’ work.¹⁴ A more common approach is to have optional or voluntary courses and lectures which are typically organised by feminist teacher educators and followed by students who are already interested in gender and sexuality issues and rights (see Lahelma’s chapter in this book). The risk is that the teacher educators and students who most urgently need more knowledge and tools to tackle heteronormativity are not part of this teaching. There is also a risk that when activist-oriented teacher educators who have organised these courses leave the university, the topic will not be handled or the courses organised by anybody else.

Although teacher training in Finland is famously high-quality, the universities are not able to train teachers to prevent heteronormativity, give knowledge on gender diversity and make schooling safe for LGBTI children and youth. The equality

projects I have been involved with have found that it is also difficult for the state to order universities to change this situation, so long as universities have autonomy to decide on how they organise their teaching. The universities themselves have often rather progressive general equality and anti-discrimination planning documents, and sexual and gender diversity issues are often addressed within them. The typical problem though is that universities are focusing on general level issues and values, but at the faculty or department level there is not enough thought given to what the advancement of gender equality and anti-discrimination—including sexual orientation and gender identity or expression—means at the practical level of teaching and teacher-student interaction.

When it comes to teachers, there is evidence that they do not have particularly negative attitudes towards LGBTI rights but, perhaps based on their training, they are not very motivated to learn how to prevent heteronormativity. In a 2010 survey published in the teacher trade union magazine 'Opettaja', the attitudes of teachers towards sexual minorities and their rights appear support of LGBTI rights legislation at first.¹⁵ Of more than a thousand respondents, about 70% indicated they approve of marriage for same-sex couples and of granting them adoption rights. Even more teachers said they would accept a teacher going through a gender-reassignment process. In their responses, most teachers indicated they would not consider schools a safe place for LGBTI youth if their non-heterosexual sexuality was common knowledge. Teacher respondents belonging to sexual minorities were notably more sensitive to the range of sexuality existing in educational institutions. In that sense, teachers belonging to sexual minorities could be considered a resource in schools.¹⁶ They are, though, often expected to hide their sexuality which makes it difficult for them to reach out to non-heterosexual colleagues and students. Of all the teacher respondents, 84% indicated they did not require more information about matters related to sexual orientation. Of non-heterosexual teachers, significantly fewer (64%), gave the same response. Non-heterosexual teachers were more eager to get more knowledge on how to tackle heteronormativity than heterosexual teachers, seemingly even if they were already more sensitive to sexual and gender diversity. Such high numbers of teachers unwilling to learn more are concerning considering that most thought their schools to be unsafe places for non-heterosexual youth to disclose their sexuality.

In school practices including teaching, heteronormativity is still widespread. LGBTI issues are dealt to some extent within Health Education and some other subjects.¹⁷ Textbooks often cover sexual and gender diversity issues only marginally, typically reinforcing heteronormativity and gender normalisation. Topics are inadequately dealt with in most books; mostly they are covered in Health Education books in the sections on Sex Education. This strategy marginalises the topics, relating them only to sexual behaviour and health or sickness. It does not question heteronormativity in Languages, History, Science and other subjects. Sex education is also criticised for being too clinical and technical, and not focusing on pleasure and cultural and social perspectives, and for reproducing heterosexuality, whiteness and able-bodiedness as norms.¹⁸ Textbooks still guide teachers in their teaching choices; transforming instruction material to question heteronormativity and to include more

relevant material from the perspective of sexual and gender diversity would be an important change.

Experiences of Non-heterosexual, Trans and Intersex Youth

In a survey of nearly 2000 young LGBTI people, one non-heterosexual¹⁹ respondent said that “school teaching is mostly really heteronormative”.²⁰ Heteronormativity, the concept many young people use themselves, is still a persistent part of Finnish culture and young people themselves are reporting in various research projects that they are surrounded by heteronormative practices.²¹ There are some transformations happening, and more young people are aware of sexual and gender diversity. This diversity is also more visible for young people in the media as well as in their own surroundings, such as hobbies, friendship networks, social media and families. Non-heterosexual and trans youth are becoming more open about their identities at an early age and in schools. More than previously, young trans²² persons are seeking advice and support for their transitioning from medical and LGBTI rights organisations.

Young people generally have fairly accepting attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity even if there still are many problems and prejudices. This could be linked to the fact that Finland is fairly secularised, and there are only small conservative religious groups that fight against LGBTI rights. Young people are constructing their sexuality and gender within their peer groups and under the influence of media and culture. Heteronormative pressure is constant but there are more and more groups of young people for whom sexual and gender diversity is fairly normal and an everyday aspect of their lives.²³ This makes it easier for LGBTI youth to find their way within youth culture. Non-heterosexual, trans and intersex youth can find more information, both negative and positive, from the internet and social media.²⁴

At the same time the role of education in Finland in advancing gender equality and understanding of diverse sexualities and genders is lagging behind the general changes in young people’s attitudes. Often, the students themselves, whether heterosexual or non-heterosexual, whether cisgender or trans, criticise the gender binary thinking or lack of information on LGBTI issues in schools. Many non-heterosexual, trans and intersex youth experience their education as problematic and feel that they do not find themselves in the curricula. Typically, the teaching and representations of people in the textbooks include only heterosexual and cisgender images, and the underlying assumption is that people are or are becoming heterosexual and cisgender. This influences young people’s understanding of themselves: they learn that sexual and gender diversity issues are not seen as relevant and some LGBTI young people might learn that they are not relevant. In a 2013 survey, a young respondent described her experience of the basic education teaching as problematic: “I think school teaching on sexual minorities is poor—it does not help students to find and accept themselves—but it feels narrow-minded and heteronormative. It is behind its time, and it should be transformed. Descriptions of bisexuality and trans

people were miserable, bad and wrong. Heterosexuality was emphasised, and books highlight [heterosexuality], as the only right way".²⁵

Still, the majority of young non-heterosexual and trans youth hide their sexual or gender identity.²⁶ Such hiding of identity is more common in rural than urban areas, and more likely in basic than upper secondary education. This secrecy around LGBTI identities increases the invisibility of sexual and gender diversity within Finnish educational institutions.

Heteronormative pressure and minority stress attached to the vulnerable position of being LGBTI youth in schools lead to risks of mental and other health problems as well as problems in everyday practices related to sleeping, eating and hygiene.²⁷ In a national and large school health survey, it was found out that non-heterosexual students (about 10% of the respondents) and trans students (about 4% of the respondents) were suffering from mental health issues and loneliness more often than heterosexual and cisgender students.²⁸

Heteronormative Violence in Schools

LGBTI youth in Finland can face various kinds of violence (physical, psychological or mental, verbal, sexual or religion-related) or threats of violence in their lives. Mental violence is most typical, then physical. The most typical forms of negative behaviour faced by non-heterosexual and trans youth during a 2013 survey were insulting name-calling and teasing and exclusion from groups, which are practices typical in schools and other educational settings.²⁹ These practices can limit students' abilities to be themselves and express their gender and sexuality in the way they want, in schools and elsewhere.³⁰

It was found in a 2017 national school health survey that non-heterosexual youth experienced violence significantly more often than heterosexual youth and trans youth clearly more often than cisgender youth.³¹ Trans respondents had been bullied on a weekly basis in basic education (23%) more often than in vocational (15%), or in general (6%) upper secondary education.³² In a similar 2019 survey, non-heterosexual respondents experienced bullying on a weekly basis more often in basic education (15%) than in vocational (9%) or general (3%) upper secondary education.³³ Non-heterosexual boys experienced violence more frequently than girls. Trans respondents experienced this kind of violence clearly more often than non-heterosexual youth.

When violence towards LGBTI people is analysed, the focus is often on homo- or transphobic violence, and the rest of the violence they face is not considered so much. In a LGBTI youth survey in 2013, it was found that much of the violence these young people experience in their lives is neither homophobic nor transphobic.³⁴ They experience more violence than their heterosexual cisgender peers, but it is not typically based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. There were however gendered differences. One important difference, for example, lies in physical violence: while 40% of non-heterosexual men felt that it was linked to their sexual orientation or

gender expression, only 15% out of non-heterosexual women felt so. The majority of non-heterosexual women saw no connection with these factors in all other forms of violence except religiously-motivated violence. Trans respondents felt more often than non-heterosexual respondents that phobia-related factors were meaningful in explaining the violence or negative behaviour that they had faced.

Gender is a meaningful aspect when analysing violence towards LGBTI youth in schools, and heteronormativity as a conceptual tool.³⁵ In a 2013 survey, one young non-heterosexual boy said: “In basic education, I experienced bullying because most of my friends were girls, and this was after other boys got interested in girls and I felt the same for boys”.³⁶ Gender non-confirming youth seem to be at greater risk of facing violence, which might explain the higher levels of violence experienced among the trans respondents and non-heterosexual boys who are perceived not to be masculine enough. I also argue that it is more difficult for presumed boys and men to bend the gender norms than for presumed girls and women, and that explains the result of transfeminine respondents’ higher experience of violence compared to transmasculine respondents. Sexual violence was also more common in the school context for non-heterosexual women (than men) and for transmasculine respondents (than transfeminine). Presumed women face sexual violence more often than presumed men. It is easier to threaten a victim with violence, or attack them with physical and mental violence, if they do not have friends to support them, do not fit into a group, or may not like or value the same things as wanted by the perpetrator of the violence. LGBTI youth belonging to other minority groups also face racist or other types of violence and intersecting differences are important to keep in mind when analysing gendered differences.³⁷

I define heteronormative violence as violence that is argued with or influenced by a heteronormative understanding of gender and sexuality or that aims to maintain heteronormativity. Homo- and transphobic violence are specific aspects of heteronormative violence. By focusing only on homo- and transphobic violence, a major part of violence towards LGBTI youth is made invisible. This is particularly problematic when thinking about the experiences of violence of non-heterosexual women and transmasculine respondents who often seem to experience heteronormative but not always homo- and transphobic violence, such as the majority of sexual violence.

Non-violence policies and programmes exist in schools, but LGBTI youth are often not taken into account at all, or only marginally, and the heteronormative culture of schools is not challenged by these policies. In the future, educational institutions should focus more on heteronormative violence, and make concrete plans on how to tackle it as part of their equality and non-discrimination planning and violence prevention. Schools and teachers should also ponder how they, along with their students, could create understanding as well as a student culture that would not re-enforce heteronormativity but question and prevent it. This would demolish the arguments and motivation behind heteronormative violence.

LGBTI Organisations' Educational Work

LGBTI organisations are doing educational outreach work in schools and other educational settings in Finland in order to break the silence around non-heterosexuality and gender diversity.³⁸ Seta, a Finnish national LGBTI umbrella organisation for 28 member organisations, is doing this work in order to advance knowledge on sexuality and gender diversity in both basic (7–16 years) and upper secondary (16–20 years) schools, as well as in tertiary education. In fact, this outreach work is often the only slightly more in-depth information students receive about LGBTI issues as schools and teachers lack the knowledge and training to offer such an education.

Seta trains voluntary educational activists of local member organisations, which are mainly responsible for organising the educational outreach work in schools and other educational institutions in their area. There are around 200 more or less active voluntary educational activists in Seta and its member organisations, and 150–250 visits in Finnish schools and other educational settings are made yearly. This means that thousands of people have a chance every year to hear an activist or an employee from Seta to talk about LGBTI issues. In every age cohort in Finland, there are about 60,000 young people, which means that the Seta training impacts around 5–10% of each age cohort. There are bigger figures in larger towns in which Seta has an active member organisation, and smaller ones in countryside and small towns. The recipients of the training are mostly young people. Also, there is so-called 'professional' training organised mostly for university students, this sometimes includes teacher trainees.³⁹

Along with telling their personal LGBTI 'story', outreach workers from Seta are mostly engaged with educating about LGBTI issues. The storytelling approach can be defined as experience-based or narrative-based education or learning which is still being used in Finland.⁴⁰ This approach is emphasised in order to increase the visibility of LGBTI people in schools. Seta tries to also address the issue of transforming or changing society. In a sense, Seta tries to incorporate some aspects of the anti-oppressive education framework, developed by Kevin Kumashiro, consisting of education for the other (role model approach), education about the other (disseminating information about LGBTI lives in Finnish society), and education that is critical of privileging and othering (norm critical pedagogy).⁴¹ Diversity understanding and LGBTI-based identity descriptions are still very much in focus during the outreach visits in schools, but recently there has been more of an aim to bring norm-critical perspectives to these visits.

Despite these efforts to transform Finnish schools and society through outreach work and activism, schools' everyday teaching practices have rarely changed. The educational outreach visits have often been done year after year in the same schools without much impact in terms of teaching practices or dominant ideology. Given the limited time and resources of the educational outreach work, questions are raised about whether efforts would be better targeted towards changing the structures of education or helping students to get models for being LGBTI. Does the norm-critical

approach mean the erasure of LGBTI visibility, and does the focus on identities mean that the queering of schools fails to get done? LGBTI organisations are only reaching a small proportion of schools and students with their educational outreach work. It is great that they can provide expertise on sexuality and gender diversity issues in developing new methods and practices, but often in practice they just fill the gaps of official education by adding extra information on LGBTI issues in heteronormative schools.⁴² LGBTI organisations might better use their knowledge to criticise the heteronormative practices of schools, or to help teachers develop their own abilities to include sexual and gender diversity in their curricula and pedagogical interactions.

Seta is funded mainly by state-owned gaming company Veikkaus which funds many non-governmental organisations, especially in the area of social and health care work. To some extent, limited funding constrains the scope and variety of Seta's educational outreach work. There is concern these gaming funds may decrease and the funding for Seta and other organisations dramatically reduce in the future, which might further constrain LGBTI educational outreach activities in Finland.

The COVID-19 Pandemic as a Challenge for LGBTI Youth

In Finland, like everywhere else, the COVID-19 crisis has affected a lot of people, including LGBTI students and teachers. My research⁴³ found that over 90% of LGBTI student respondents said that COVID-19 had had an influence on their studies. The most common influence was remote learning, when schools were closed and students studied at home with computers. For LGBTI students this sometimes created difficulties but for others it provided safety. One fifth of the respondents said that remote learning had decreased discrimination, bullying and unjust behaviour towards them. A third said that the COVID-19 pandemic had made it less likely that they were treated badly based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. The difficulties some faced included problems in concentrating on their studies (65%), increased loneliness (59%) and fear of getting infected by COVID (33%). For some the crisis had motivated them to drop out of education and had strained relationships with people at home. Non-heterosexual women were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic more often than men, and transmasculine respondents more often than transfeminine.

The Save the Children organisation surveyed the influence of the COVID-19 crisis on young people in Finland and included questions about respondent's sexual orientation and gender identity.⁴⁴ Compared to cisgender heterosexual respondents, LGBTI youth respondents were more likely to feel themselves stressed (66%, all 54%), anxious (63%, all 49%) and depressed (49%, all 33%) because of the COVID-19 crisis.⁴⁵ In my study, it was found that LGBTI youth were influenced more than adults by the pandemic, with 45% more depressed, 64% more anxious, 40% more fearful and 17% more suicidal. Of all LGBTI youth, 43% felt their wellbeing was worse than prior to the crisis. These responses were more common for trans respondents than non-heterosexual respondents, and more common for non-heterosexual

women than men. At the same time 48% of the youth respondents had avoided health services and 19% avoided mental health services. These were more typical for trans respondents than for non-heterosexual respondents, even if there were more mental health problems among trans respondents. A gender-reassignment process had been postponed or put off indefinitely by 7%.

In my interviews with LGBTI human rights organisation activists and employees (N = 23), I found that much of the educational outreach work done with schools, peer-group work with young people and client meetings with young people had been cancelled, stopped or changed into some type of remote work. This caused problems, when remote contacts were not always easily organised from home, remote client working or peer-group activities did not fit well for all youth and children, and cancelling of educational outreach visits to schools has caused reduced information on LGBTI issues in education. At the same time, remote work had created new possibilities to reach some new audiences and made internet communication easier with new clients and youth groups, such as people living outside bigger towns.

In the interviews it was also reported that there were serious problems with young people in receiving health and mental health services. There were particular concerns about the situation of trans youth (including problems getting into a gender-reassignment process), youth with mental health issues, and young people living in conservative homes or in poverty. Organisations were also worried about delays with legal changes concerning trans legislation and the continued funding of their work.

Even if the COVID-19 pandemic had eased some discrimination and bullying in Finland because of distance learning, there had been several serious and long-lasting problems amongst LGBTI youth related to mental health, dropping out of education and loneliness. At the same time both LGBTI organisations and the wider Finnish social and health care system had difficulties responding to the needs of LGBTI youth.

Conclusion: Actions Needed to Interrupt Heteronormativity in Schools

Even if there have been many progressive changes with legislation concerning LGBTI people in Finland and even if special attention has been given to diversity and equality within education policy development, these changes often affected school practices marginally and partially. There is still clearly more violence towards LGBTI children and youth compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth in schools, and Finnish schools are not safe places to study for many LGBTI youth. Teacher training institutes as well as teaching cultures in schools are typically heteronormative, or at best only discuss sexualities and gender diversity on the margins. The same is true with sex education which otherwise is seen as progressive and meaningful. There is also

resistance among teachers to tackle the issue of diversity, especially when their training does not provide suitable conceptual and practical tools.

LGBTI teachers are typically expected to hide their sexualities and non-normative gender identity, when at the same time this is not expected from heterosexual and cisgender teachers. School health services are also not adequate to handle issues of LGBTI students in an equal manner, and often the students are left to tackle discriminatory practices and self-acceptance by themselves. There are positive examples within Finnish schools on how to better take care of LGBTI issues and resist heteronormativity, but they remain single efforts by some active teachers, students or other actors. Finnish society and its schools are not yet taking enough responsibility to challenge heteronormativity and make studying safe and equal for all.

Deborah Britzman has argued that schools and educational workers need to develop a deeper understanding and knowledge of queer theory to interrupt heteronormativity in education.⁴⁶ When it comes to the inclusion of sexual diversity or equality however, education policies lack both scope and content. The Finnish education system generally seems to maintain silence around non-heterosexuality and non-normative gender, mentioning them only vaguely in policy documents, such as in the core curriculum. Moreover, policy changes, aiming to include LGBTI themes and subjectivities, have only recently been stipulated. This indicates the gulf between a progressive society concerning LGBTI visibility and rights, and what is essentially still a quite conservative school system.

Mollie Blackburn argues it is not enough to include discussion or themes about LGBTI realities in the curriculum, without going into the underlying power structures that sustain and legitimate heterosexuality as good behaviour in a hierarchical moral ranking of sexualities.⁴⁷ Currently, the curriculum often depicts LGBTI subjectivities as the Other. To interrupt heteronormativity, teachers need to engage their students in critical thinking and make them aware of how the processes of Othering and privileging are legitimised and maintained by social structures and dominant ideologies.⁴⁸ Most education on LGBTI realities and subjectivities in Finland is therefore often carried out by the educational outreach work of LGBTI organisations. Their educational outreach work continues as the main window of opportunity to include LGBTI themes in teaching.⁴⁹ At the same time the responsibility still lies with Finnish educational institutions and their teachers and leaders to change school culture regarding inclusivity of non-heterosexual, trans and intersex students and teachers. This responsibility must be understood to bridge the gap between a 'utopic' society and the present situation in schools, if Finland's education system is to ever become close to a rainbow paradise.

Notes

1. ILGA Europe Rainbow Map 2020. *Annual review of the human rights situation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex people in Europe*. <https://www.ilga-europe.org/sites/default/files/Attachments/ilgaeurope-rainbowmap-2020-interactive.pdf>. Accessed 01 Dec 2021.
2. Jalonen, J., and M. Salin. 2020. Pitäisikö homoseksuaaleilla olla oikeus elää haluamallaan tavalla? Tutkimus suomalaisten suhtautumisesta homoseksuaaleihin 2000-luvulla. *Yhteiskuntapolitiikka* 85(3): 259–270.
3. Britzman, D. 1995. Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight. *Educational Theory* 45(2): 151–165.
 Britzman, D. 1998. *Lost subjects, contested objects*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
 Butler, J. 1990. *Gender trouble. feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.
 Butler, J. 1993. *Bodies that matter. On the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge.
 Warner, M. 1993. *Fear of queer planet: Queer politics and social theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
4. DePalma, R., and E. Atkinson. 2006. The sound of silence: Talking about sexual orientation and schooling. *Sex Education* 6(4): 333–349.
 DePalma, R., and E. Atkinson. 2010. The nature of institutional heteronormativity in primary schools and practice-based responses. *Teaching and Teacher Education* 26(8): 1669–1676.
 Jagose, A. 1996. *Queer theory*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
 Kumashiro, K.K. 2002. *Troubling education. Queer activism and anti-oppressive pedagogy*. New York: Routledge/Falmer.
5. Cho, S., K. Crenshaw, and L. McCall. 2013. Toward a field of intersectionality studies: Theory, applications, and praxis. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38(4), 785–810.
6. My focus is on LGBT youth mainly, due to the fact that it has been rather difficult to reach intersex youth for surveys and interviews, but many heteronormative problems facing LGBT youth are similar to the ones facing intersex youth. I have written on the difficulties in researching the experiences of intersex people in education. Lehtonen, J. 2017. Hankala kysymys. Intersukupuolisuus suomalaisissa koulu- ja työelämä tutkimyksissä. *Finnish Journal of Gender Studies* 30(1): 71–75.
7. The WeAll project was funded by Academy of Finland Strategic Research Funding number 292883 (2015–2021). More info: weallfinland.fi.
8. POPS 2014. *Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet*. Helsinki: National Board of Education. p. 14.
9. *Ibid.*, p.18.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
11. NBE 2015. *Tasa-arvo on taitolaji—Opas sukupuolen tasa-arvon edistämiseen perusopetuksessa*. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
12. Mikkola, A. 2020. Tasa-arvosuunnitelmien seuranta 2019. Perusopetuksen oppilaitosten tasa-arvo- ja yhdenvertaisuussuunnittelu. *Reports* 2020:23. Helsinki: National Board of Education.
13. Ikävalko, E. 2016. *Vaikenemisiä ja vastarintaa. Valtasuhteet ja toiminnan mahdollisuudet oppilaitosten tasa-arvosuunnittelussa*. Helsinki: Faculty of Behavioural Sciences.
14. Lehtonen, J. 2012a. Gender awareness in research on teacher education in Finland. In *Cultural practices and transitions in education*, eds. T. Tolonen, T. Palmu, S. Lappalainen and T. Kurki, 226–239. London: The Tufnell Press.
 Kreitz-Sandberg, S., and E. Lahelma. 2021. Global demands—local practices: Working towards including gender equality in teacher education in Finland and Sweden. *Nordic Journal of Comparative and International Education* 5(1): 50–68.
15. Lehtonen, J. 2012b. Opettajien käsityksiä seksuaalisuuden kirjosta. *Finnish Journal of Youth Studies* 30(2): 19–30.
 Lehtonen, J., T. Palmu, and E. Lahelma. 2014. Negotiating sexualities, constructing possibilities: Teachers and diversity. In *Inequalities in the teaching profession. A global perspective*, ed. M-P. Moreau, 118–135. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

16. Lehtonen, J. 2004. Lesbian, gay and bisexual teachers—invisible models for the youth. In *Straight people don't tell, do they? Negotiating the boundaries of sexuality and gender at work*, eds. J. Lehtonen and K. Mustola, 238–254. Helsinki: Ministry of Labour.
17. Lehtonen, J. 2003. *Seksuualisuus ja sukupuoli koulussa* Helsinki: Yliopistopaino.
Lehtonen, J. 2016. Sukupuolen ja seksuaalisuuden moninaisuus osana laaja-alaista seksuaalikasvatusta ja heteronormatiivisuuden purkamista. In *Seksualikasvatuksen tueksi*, ed. K. Bildjuschkin, 104–115. Helsinki: Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.
18. Honkasalo, V. 2018. Culture and sexuality in Finnish health education textbooks. *Sex Education* 18(5): 541–554.
19. Non-heterosexual is a qualitative term used to describe a person who has sexual feelings towards their own gender, or relationship or sexual practices with their own gender, or self-definitions that refer to these feelings or practices (such as lesbian, gay or bisexual).
Lehtonen, J. 2003. *Seksuualisuus ja sukupuoli koulussa*. Helsinki: Yliopistopaino.
20. The data for the analysis comes from the research project “Wellbeing of rainbow youth”. This was a joint project of Seta and the Finnish Youth Research Network. I was a member of the group that planned the survey questionnaire and commented on the reports and was able to use the data for my own research. My focus was on non-heterosexual and trans youth under 30-years-old (N = 1861): 1) non-heterosexual men (N = 380), 2) non-heterosexual women (N = 994), 1) transmasculine youth (N = 404), and 4) transfeminine youth (N = 83). Lehtonen, J. 2016. op. cit.
21. Lehtonen, J. 2014. Sukupuolittuneita valintoja? Ei-heteroseksuaaliset ja transnuoret koulutuksessa. *The Finnish Journal of Gender Studies* 27(4): 67–71.
Lehtonen, J. 2018. Ei-heteroseksuaalisten poikien ja transnuorten kokemukset ja valinnat koulutuksessa. In *Poikatutkimus*, eds. A. Kivijärvi, T. Huuki, and H. Lunabba, 121–145. Tampere: Vastapaino.
22. Trans refers to a person who challenges the gendered norms and expectations in ways that conflict with their gender design at birth. By ‘transmasculine’ is meant a person, who was designated at birth as a girl, and by ‘transfeminine’ is meant a person who was designated at birth as a boy, both of whom later defined themselves as trans, or questioned their gender identity in some other way.
23. Alanko, K. 2013. *Hur määr HBTIQ-unga i Finland?*. Helsinki: Finnish Youth Research Society and Seta.
Taavetti, R. 2015. *Olis siistiä, jos ei tarttis määritellä ...* Kuriton ja tavallinen sateenkaarinuoruus. Helsinki: Finnish Youth Research Society and Seta.
Lehtonen, J., and R. Taavetti. 2018. Ambivalent positions and challenging contexts in researching “rainbow youth” in Finland. In *Engaging youth in activism, research and pedagogical praxis: Transnational and intersectional perspectives on gender, sex, and race*, eds. J. Hearn, T. Shefer, K. Ratele and F. Boonzaier, 75–90. New York & London: Routledge.
24. Lehtonen, J. 2019. Sexuality and sexualization in youth (Finland). In *Bloomsbury education and childhood studies (Finland)*, eds. J. Kauko and K. Tilleczeck, New York: Bloomsbury Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350996311.0016>.
25. Participant in Alanko, op. cit., published in Finnish in Lehtonen, 2016. op. cit.
26. Lehtonen 2014, op. cit.
27. Hyvärinen, A., S. Jokela, and J. Lehtonen. 2021. *Sateenkaarinuoret tarvitsevat tukea elinympäristössä ja palveluissa*. Helsinki: Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. <https://blogi.thl.fi/sateenkaarinuoret-tarvitsevat-tukea-elinymparistossa-ja-palveluissa/>. Accessed 01 Dec 2021.
28. Jokela, S., P. Luopa, A. Hyvärinen, T. Ruuska, T. Martelin, and R. Klemetti. 2020. *Sukupuoli- ja seksuaalivähemmistöihin kuuluvien nuorten hyvinvointi: Kouluterveyskyselyn tuloksia 2019*. Helsinki: Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare. https://www.julkari.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/140742/URN_ISBN_978-952-343-580-3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y. Accessed 01 Dec 2021.
29. Lehtonen 2018, op. cit.

30. Blackburn, M. 2012. *Interrupting hate. Homophobia in schools and what literacy can do about it*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- DePalma, R., and E. Atkinson. 2009. *Interrogating heteronormativity in primary-schools: Project*. London: Trentham Books.
31. Luopa, P., O. Kanste, and R. Klemetti. 2017. *Toisella asteella opiskelevien sateenkaarinuorten hyvinvointi 2017. Kouluterveyskyselyyn tuloksia* : Helsinki: Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare.
- Ikonen, R. 2019. Lasten ja nuorten kokema väkivalta: Tuloksia Kouluterveyskyselystä ja Lasten terveys, hyvinvointi ja palvelut—tutkimuksesta. In *Väkivallaton lapsuus—toimintasuunnitelma lapsiin kohdistuvan väkivallan ehkäisystä 2020 – 2025*, eds. U. Korpilahti, H. Kettunen, E. Nuotio, S. Jokela, V. Nummi and P. Lillsunde, 73–78. Helsinki: Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.
32. Ibid.
33. Ikonen 2019, op. cit.
34. Lehtonen 2018, op. cit.
35. Lehtonen, J. 2002. Heteronormativity and name-calling—constructing boundaries for students' genders and sexualities. In *Gendered and sexualised violence in educational environments*, eds. V. Sunnari, J. Kangasvuo, and M. Heikkinen, 201–215. Oulu: Oulu University Press.
36. Participant in Alanko, K. 2013. op. cit, published in Lehtonen, J. 2021. Heteronormative violence in schools: Focus on homophobia, transphobia and the experiences of trans and non-heterosexual youth in Finland. In *Violence, victimisation and young people. education and safe learning environments*, eds. Y. Odenbring & T. Johansson, 155–172. Switzerland: Springer.
37. Boonzaier, F., J. Lehtonen, and R. Pattman. 2015. Youth, violence and equality: Perspectives on engaging youth toward social transformation. Editorial for Special Issue of youth, violence and equality: Local–global perspectives. *African Safety Promotion* 13(1), 1–6.
38. Francis, D., J. I. Kjaran, and J. Lehtonen, eds. 2020. *Queer social movements and outreach work in schools: A global perspective*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
39. Kjaran, J.I., and J. Lehtonen. 2020. Queer outreach work in Nordic countries: Challenges, tensions and contradictions in queering schools and teaching about sexual and gender diversity. In *Queer social movements and outreach work in schools: A global perspective*, eds. D. Francis, J.I. Kjaran, and J. Lehtonen, 15–37. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
40. Lehtonen, J. 2017. Troubling normativities? Constructing sexual and gender diversity in the educational work of Finnish LGBTI human rights association Setä. In *Troubling educational cultures in the Nordic countries*, eds. T. Vaahtera, A-M. Niemi, S. Lappalainen, and D. Beach, 117–139. London: The Tufnell Press.
41. Kumashiro, op. cit.
42. Kjaran and Lehtonen, op. cit.
43. I conducted a survey for LGBTI people (N = 325) and made interview with employees and activists in LGBTI organisations (N = 23).
- Lehtonen, J. 2020. *HLBTI-ihmiset ja järjestöt koronavirüsissä—tutkimustietoa tarvitaan*. WeAll-project blog. Helsinki: Helsingin Yliopisto. <http://weallfinland.fi/hlbt-i-hmiset-ja-jarjestot-koronakriisissa-tutkimustietoa-tarvitaan/>. Accessed 01 Dec 2021.
- Lehtonen, J. 2020. *Yhdenvertainen virus? HLBTI-ihmiset koronavirüsissä*. Poliitikasta.fi. <https://politiikasta.fi/yhdenvertainen-virus-hlbt-i-hmiset-koronakriisissa/>. Accessed 28 July 2020.
44. Pelastakaa Lapset. 2020. Lapsen ääni 2020 –raportti. https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/pelastakaaalapset/main/2020/05/22/105112/Lapsen_aani_2020_FI_web.pdf. Accessed 01 Dec 2021.
- Seventeen percent of the respondents were non-heterosexual and altogether there were 548 LGBTI youth respondents.
45. Lasten ja nuorten hyvinvointi koronavirüsissä jälkihoidossa 2020. *Lapsistrategian koronaryhmän raportti lapsen oikeuksien toteutumisesta*. Publications of the Finnish Government 2020:21. Helsinki: Finnish Government. <https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/handle/10024/162318>. Accessed 01 Dec 2021.

46. Britzman, D. 1995, op. cit.
47. Blackburn, M. V. 2012. *Interrupting hate. Homophobia in schools and what literacy can do about it*. New York: Teachers College Press.
48. Kumashiro, op. cit.
49. Kjaran, J. I. and J. Lehtonen 2017. Windows of opportunities: Nordic perspectives on sexual diversity in education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 22(10): 1035–1047. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2017.1414319>.

Jukka Lehtonen is Senior Researcher in the Faculty of Education in the University of Oulu and in Gender Studies at the University of Helsinki where he is also Docent in Sociology of Education. His research focus is on gender and sexuality diversity and their intersections with various differences in education and in work environments. His current research focuses on the gender and sexuality diversity with the primary education (Mapping, Making & Mattering: Arts and research-activism for addressing sexual harassment in pre-teen peer cultures, Oulu University) and the experiences of COVID-19 crises of LGBTI care workers (En Route to Recovery: Diversity and vulnerability in care work during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, Helsinki University). These research projects are funded by the Academy of Finland.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

