



# Sexual orientation in Norwegian science textbooks: Heteronormativity and selective inclusion in textbooks and teaching



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Science textbooks exclude same sex relations when addressing contraceptives.
- Norwegian LGHT-students are not offered relevant information on STI.
- Norwegian science textbooks do not respond to inclusive intention in curriculum.
- Exclusive textbooks may work for inclusive teaching if teachers know queer theory.

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores how sexual orientation is addressed in Norwegian science textbooks currently in use in grades 8–10. The analysis demonstrates that sexual orientation is included in very selective ways when science textbooks deals with sex education. I argue that Norwegian textbooks conceptualize non-heterosexuals as “the other” even though the current national curriculum represents inclusive intentions. Heterosexuality is the only framework when bodies, sexual practice, contraceptives, and sexually transmitted infections are addressed and critical perspectives on heteronormativity are not provided. Selective inclusion of sexual orientations in science textbooks, leave teachers with limited tools for providing inclusive and anti-oppressive sexual education.

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## 1. Introduction

How is sexual orientation and homosexuality addressed in Norwegian curricula, textbooks and teaching? When are such topics included and in which ways? Do textbooks presents minorities as “the other” or do they offer inclusive perspectives on sexuality? If not, what kind of critical perspectives do teachers need to prevent “othering” and marginalization of sexual minorities when teaching sexual education?

Studies on sexuality and schooling have documented over the last few decades that heterosexuality provides the “natural” framework for teaching and discussions about sexuality in Western classrooms (Abbott, Ellis, & Abbott, 2015; Allen, 2005; Røthing, 2008; Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Epstein, O’Flynn, & Telford, 2003; Kehily, 2002; McNeill, 2013; Rasmussen, 2006). This is partly reflected in what is said and written in teaching and textbooks and

partly in what is *not* said and written. In their influential book, *Schooling Sexualities*, Epstein and Johnson (1998) argued that heterosexuality appears to be compulsory and “a hidden curriculum” in school, since heterosexuality is continually presented as the preferred and only normal sexual orientation.

In the Norwegian context acceptance of same-sex relations has become a symbol of “Norwegianness” in recent years. Gender equality and homotolerance are today considered core Norwegian values (Gressgård & Jacobsen, 2008; Gullestad, 2002; Mühleisen & Røthing, 2009) and are explicitly presented as such in Norwegian teaching and textbooks (Røthing & Svendsen, 2011; Røthing, 2012; Svendsen, 2014). To be tolerant in general, and “homotolerance” in particular, have come to signify Western countries and to *belong* to westerners as *opposed* to non-westerners (Brown, 2006), and adopting certain sexual norms seems to have become a prerequisite for citizenship in these contexts (Butler, 2009; Gressgård & Jacobsen, 2008; Haritaworn, 2010; Mühleisen, Røthing & Svendsen, 2012; Reimers, 2017). However, ideas of Norwegian homotolerance may veil discrimination and marginalization since such ideas imply that

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those challenges are left in the Norwegian past.

The national idea of Norway and Norwegians as both homo-inclusive and homotolerant is an important backdrop for this article. Based on the image of Norwegian homotolerance, one would expect textbooks to be inclusive and aware of exclusive approaches. According to the current curriculum, teaching requirements for science state that during grade 8–10 (14–16 years old) *Norwegian students should be trained to discuss issues related to “sexuality, sexual orientation, contraceptives, abortion, and sexually transmitted infections.”*<sup>1</sup> In this article, I set out to investigate how sexual orientation is addressed in Norwegian science textbooks for secondary school. Regarding this specific teaching requirement, my main research question is: Do Norwegian science textbooks offer inclusive and relevant information about contraceptives and sexually transmitted infections to students with different sexual orientations, or do the textbooks reproduce othering perceptions of non-heterosexual practices and orientations? To help develop new knowledge on this issue, the following questions are examined in this paper: (1) Is sexual orientation addressed in the textbooks for science grad 8-10? (2) If included, is sexual orientation addressed in relation to sexuality, contraceptives and sexually transmitted infections? (3) How is sexual orientation addressed if it is not related to any of the issues mentioned in the teaching requirement in question? (4) How are the topics of sexuality, contraceptives and sexually transmitted infections presented if sexual orientation is not included in the presentations?

## 2. Theoretical framework

This article draws on critical perspectives within the educational field that focus on inclusion and exclusion from different angles. I am particularly inspired by post-colonial perspectives on processes and production of “the other” (Said, 1978), as well as insights from queer theory. Queer theory offers theoretical tools to analyze processes of othering and privileging in relation to sexuality. “Heteronormativity” is a core concept within queer theory. The term refers to *descriptions* of how heterosexuality in various ways and contexts appears to be normative, normalized, desirable, and taken for granted (Berlant & Warner, 2000; Warner, 1993). However, heteronormativity also refers to *processes* that produce such images of heterosexuality and that reproduce the privileged position of heterosexuality. A central ambition within queer research is to investigate such processes. The term heteronormativity emphasizes that the ambition is to critically discuss social norms and social systems, not heterosexual practices of individual women and men (Ambjörnsson, 2006, p. 52).

If heteronormativity is applied in a narrow sense, it may contribute to reproduce a binary approach to sexuality, focusing on (only) heterosexuality versus homosexuality. An exclusive focus on heterosexuality and homosexuality do however neglect other sexual positions and practices that are actually available (Namaste, 1994, p. 229). Such an approach may also produce a false monolithic image of heterosexuality rather than investigating and unveiling actual varieties within heterosexualities (Jackson, 1999). In this article, I am tracing how “sexual orientation” is being addressed in Norwegian science textbooks. Since the textbooks tend to lean on a binary understanding of sexuality, and since I am following and presenting the arguments in the textbooks, this article may contribute to reproduce the binary understanding of sexuality and thus fail to challenge this same binary.

This article is particularly drawing on Kevin Kumashiro's book

*Troubling Education* (2002), and his discussions of inclusive and anti-oppressive education. Kumashiro has, inspired by post-colonial perspectives and queer theory, identified four approaches to inclusive education, or what he describes as anti-oppressive education. The first two are the most common: (1) education *for* the other and (2) education *about* the other. The strength of the first approach is “that it calls on educators to recognize that there is great diversity among the student population” and that marginalized students “are harmed by various forms of oppression in schools” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 37). Furthermore, this approach emphasizes that educators have a responsibility to make schools into places that are for all students. The strength of the second approach is that it “teaches all students, not just the Othered students, as it calls on educators to enrich all students' understanding of different ways of being” (pp. 41–42). This second approach also attempts to “normalize differences and Otherness by encouraging students to think of and treat other ways of being as just as “normal” and acceptable as normative ways of being” (pp. 41–42). However, both approaches have significant weaknesses. In order to teach for and about “the Other,” educators need to define “the Other.” But who gets the right to define and decide who is to be considered “the Other?” And who or what is considered “normal”? When teaching about the other, “otherness might become essentialized and remain different from the norm” (Kumashiro, 2002, pp. 41–42). Furthermore, “teaching about the Other often positions the Other as the expert” in ways that may “reinforce the social, cultural and even intellectual space or division between the norm and the Other” (pp. 41–42).

The last two types of anti-oppressive education identified by Kumashiro (2002) aim at not positioning the other as the other and different from the implicit norm in education. This is accomplished through (3) Education that is critical of privileging and othering (pp. 44–50) and (4) Education that changes students and society (pp. 50–70). In the Norwegian and Swedish context, such approaches are named “Norm critical pedagogy” (Røthing & Svendsen, 2009; Røthing, 2017; Bromseth & Darj, 2010; Kalonaityté, 2014; Martinsson, Reimers, Reingarde, & Lundgren, 2007; Martinsson & Reimers, 2008). Norm critical pedagogy are inspired by Kumashiro and draws on post-colonial, queer and intersectional perspectives, as well as critical whiteness studies, and a central contribution has been to critically discuss what is referred to as “pedagogy of tolerance”. Pedagogy of tolerance emphasizes the need for students to tolerate “the other”, rather than the need for engaging in critical reflections on power and injustice in school and society. Statements from students and teachers such as “we have to be nice to the homosexuals since they are normal people with feelings like us” and “homosexuals can't help it so we really should be nice to them and not cause them any problems” (Røthing, 2008, p. 260), illustrate precisely what this approach produce. Norm critical pedagogy on the other hand is calling for critical perspectives on power structures and the processes that keep reproducing norms, privileges and othering. The overall ambition is to help students develop “lasting awareness about power relations in the society, that can also be applied on situations outside the classroom” (Kalonaityté, 2014, p. 9).

## 3. The Norwegian context: Sexual orientation in curricula and teaching

Homosexuality was first mentioned in a Norwegian curriculum in 1974, two years after the Norwegian state decriminalized men having sex with men.<sup>2</sup> In 1974 “homosexuality,” together with

<sup>1</sup> A revised curriculum from 2013 added a few more topics to this specific teaching requirement, but the additions do not affect the analysis in this article.

<sup>2</sup> Women having sex with women was never formally illegal.

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