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Disruptions of desexualized heteronormativity – queer identification(s) as pedagogical resources

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ABSTRACT
Desexualized heteronormativity saturates most educational spaces. Thus, research on LGBTQ teachers tends to focus on the precarious and vulnerable work conditions produced by this norm. The aim of this article is to contribute to a shift in the tale(s) about LGBTQ teachers so that they are presented as subjects rather than victims. Three interviews of self-identified lesbian preschool teachers are read through the lenses of the philosophy of Biesta and queer pedagogy in order to elucidate how being a queer teacher is a positive experience, and to contribute to discussions about queer pedagogy. As positioned outside the heterosexual norm, the teachers have acquired experiences, perspectives, interests, sensitivities, and knowledge that they bring into the educational space. The article highlights how the presence of queer bodies in classrooms interrupts the dominant heterosexual norm. The article highlights how embodiments of non-confirmative gender stand out as a significant trait of queer pedagogy, inducing queer moments of uncertainty that make way for understanding gender and sexuality differently. These queering moments need to be extended to other excluding and limiting norms, such as those of race, class, ableness, and religion, in order to make way for subjectification of students and teachers.

Introduction

Bodies are not inert; they function interactively and productively. They act and react. They generate what is new, surprising, unpredictable. (Grosz, 1994, p. xi)

This article is a response and an alternative to the vast amount of research that points to how heterosexual norms in education pose limitations and obstacles for LGBTQ teachers. The aim is to shift the perspective away from queer teacher bodies as problems and to propose positive pedagogical effects of LGBTQ teachers. I will start by presenting research from different Western nations about self-identified LGBTQ teachers. I will then proceed to describe some queer and educational theory that I have found useful in order to make trouble with the dominant reiteration of LGBTQ identification as a problematic position for teachers. Using this theory in relation to interviews with three self-identified lesbian preschool teachers, I will argue for queer-identified teachers as beneficial for students and
for the teachers themselves. I will end the article with a discussion of possibilities of queer teacher bodies as part of a pedagogy that makes trouble with different forms of normativities, thus forming prerequisites for students to emerge as subjects in a society characterized by plurality.

Gray, Harris, and Jones (2016) claim that there is a lack of positive narratives from which LGBTQ teachers can draw and that identifying as LGBTQ is therefore more or less incompatible with the teaching profession (see also Renold, 2005). As a teacher educator in Sweden, I am not convinced that this is necessarily the case. I began as a teacher educator in 1998. During the first ten years, I never encountered open LGBTQ students, and upon asking the students, they told me that they never met LGBTQ teachers at their practicum. This is no longer the case. Now, I regularly meet students who identify as LGBTQ and who are out. Based on this experience, as well as on my own experience as a self-identified LGBTQ teacher in academia, my hope is that this article will be the beginning of a large set of positive narratives about and for LGBTQ teachers. Thereby, the article may contribute to a shift in the tale(s) of LGBTQ teachers so that they are presented as subjects rather than victims in educational spaces.

Schools as heterosexual spaces – a hegemonization of the tale of the deplorable LGBTQ teacher

The outcomes of all research are delimited by how we construct the problems we want to explore and by the questions we ask. Considering this, it is apparent that for more than three decades (starting with Epstein in the early 1990s), research on LGBTQ teachers has repeatedly focused on questions about limitations for LGBTQ teachers in schools. Thus, it has evinced how LGBTQ teachers become problematic deviances, for both themselves and others. Without diminishing the problems and the discrimination that LGBTQ-identified teachers experience, one reason for the outcome of this research could be the questions that the research aims to answer. Before presenting an alternative tale of the experiences of LGBTQ teachers, I will present a brief overview of research. It demonstrates that the absence of sexuality in schools is combined with the ubiquitous presence of sexuality. Furthermore, this absence/presence of sexuality presumes heterosexuality as the default, which contributes to the simultaneous desexualization of heterosexuality together with a sexualization of non-confirmative sexuality and gender positions. The consequences of this for LGBTQ teachers are dire, positioning them in vulnerable and precarious positions in relation to students, parents, and colleagues.

Different forms of heteronormativity

The bulk of this research describes schools as heterosexual spaces that promote heterosexuality and consequently make LGBTQ identities and practices invisible (Epstein & Johnson, 1998; Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004; Gray, 2013; Griffin, 1992; Kehily, 2002; Røthing, 2008). The power of the dominant heterosexual norm finds various ways of expression, from outright homophobia to softer forms of homotolerance. In order to nuance expressions of heteronormativity and mark that although heterosexuality is dominant it is not compulsory (cf. Rich, 1980), Seidman (2009) introduces the notion of
the less coercive concept of ‘institutionalized heterosexuality’. The concept refers to situations where homosexuality is tolerated but where those identified as homosexual are always marginalized as the other. In order to describe dominant attitudes towards queers in the Nordic countries, Røthing (2008) introduces the concept of homotolerance. Like institutionalized heterosexuality, it points to situations where heterosexuality is the norm at the same time as homosexuality is recognized and tolerated. Based on this, Røthing pursues a discussion about the ambiguous concept of tolerance. Like Brown (2006) (cf. Reimers, 2010), she points to how tolerance in relation to sexual and gender minorities forms power relations based on a tolerant heterosexual majority that benevolently allows a homosexual minority to exist as a deviant other without questioning the superiority position of the heterosexual majority.

The absent presence of sexuality in schools

Schools as sexual spaces are peculiar in that ‘sexuality is both nowhere and everywhere’ (Epstein & Johnson, 1998, p. 108). The paradoxical ubiquitous absence and presence of sexuality in schools enforces the heterosexual norm by making it into a given default presumption and expectation of gendered identities. Thus, the desexualization of educational spaces enforces heteronormativity by emptying it of its possible sexual affront (Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma, & Hemingway, 2008). Being, or being expected to become, heterosexual is simply the default and natural identity position in schools, without necessary sexual connotations. Teachers and students are presumed to form their lives in line with the heterosexual nuclear family manuscript, and the heterosexual norm constitutes the taken for granted underpinning for activities and discussions (cf. Simonsson, 2018). Dominant notions about teacher identities repeat this desexualized heteronormativity of schools by representing teachers as not expressing any form of sexuality. Popular media usually represent teachers as plain persons lacking any sexual attractiveness (cf. Weber & Mitchell, 1995). Thus, a sexy teacher becomes a contradiction in terms. In a study by Reimers (2010), teacher students expressed the same phenomena by arguing that teachers need to be and act normal and avoid standing out. Of course, this affects all teachers regardless of self-identified sexuality; they have to strike a delicate balance between expressing their personality in the course of their teaching and ensuring that no hint of sexuality or a non-confirmative gender performance leaks out (cf. Cavanagh, 2005; Kehily, 2002; Lahelma, Palmu, & Gordon, 2000).

Drawing on Straut and Sapon-Shevin (2002), Reimers (2010) claims that desexualized heteronormative schools create situations where heterosexuality becomes desexualized as the normal position without acknowledging sexual desires, while it simultaneously makes articulations of homosexuality into solely sexual identity positions. In being open about not conforming to the heterosexual position, LGBTQ teachers breach the tacit understanding that sexuality is not compatible with the education space (cf. Probyn, 2004). LGBTQ teachers who talk about their partners, their friends, and their plans for the weekends are therefore risk being seen as flaunting their sexuality.

Working conditions and strategies of LGBTQ teachers

As desexualized heterosexual spaces, schools limit the possibilities for performances of gender and sexual diversity. This is the case whether the context is homophobic or homotolerant. Irrespective of national context, the bulk of research on LGBTQ teachers
demonstrates that these teachers are victims of heteronormativity and consequently positioned in restrained and precarious work conditions where they have to carefully monitor their gender and sexuality performances.

In an early study, Griffin (1992) recounted how LGBTQ teachers in Australia managed their sexuality in relation to the desexualized heteronormativity of their workplace. Their strategies varied, from passing strategies such as avoiding challenging assumptions of heterosexuality and actively posing as heterosexual, to more open strategies such as not revealing anything but assuming that everyone knows, being out to colleagues but not to students, and being out to everybody. Twenty years later, Ferfolja (2007) described how self-identified lesbian teachers used strategies in order to pass as heterosexual. The same strategies have been found among, for example, LGBTQ teachers in Sweden (Lundgren, 2010), in the UK (Gray, 2013), in New Zealand (Hardie, 2012), in the US (Connell, 2015), in Finland (Lehtonen & Mustola, 2004, pp. 238–254), and in Ireland (Neary, Gray, & O’Sullivan, 2018). From a US perspective, King (2004) describes how the combination of desexualized heteronormativity with a norm of childhood innocence makes it more or less impossible for gay men to teach young children (cf. Allan et al., 2008; Epstein & Johnson, 1998). Taken together, the research on LGBTQ teachers paints a grim picture of a working life characterized by a need to repeatedly negotiate what to reveal and what to conceal – and to whom – about one’s identity position as queer. In this article, I want to present an alternative story. Instead of the plethora of negative accounts of the trials and tribulations of LGBTQ teachers, I offer three positive narratives of the experiences of LGBTQ teachers. In stressing the beneficial, rewarding, and positive aspects of their positions as queer bodies, I want to take on the proposal by Gilbert (2014) and E. Gray (2018) to rethink the sexual spaces of education and what this might imply for LGBTQ teachers. In order to do this, I will put their narratives within a framework of queer pedagogy.

**Curriculum theory and queer pedagogy**

From the above, it is evident that schools are desexualized heteronormative pedagogical spaces. In this section, I will outline a theoretical framework for thinking about LGBTQ teachers in school in relation to the democratic aspect of education and queer pedagogy. I will begin by elaborating on Biesta’s discussions about the aim of education (Biesta, 2009). I will draw on how Sumara and Davis (1999), Kumashiro (2002), and Reimers (2010) have discussed queer pedagogy, and I will stress the significance of embodiment (Grosz, 1994; Probyn, 2004) and performativity (Butler, 1999).

According to Biesta, the function of education is threefold: qualification; socialization; and subjectification (Biesta, 2006, 2009). Qualification is probably the least disputed of these aspects. It refers to providing students with knowledge and skills. The socialization function is to make students part of a social order and to ensure that they develop the competence required to navigate within it. One could argue that it is in relation to this socialization function that LGBTQ teachers are constructed and apprehended as problematic, because the socialization practices are permeated by heteronormativity. The third function, subjectification, relates to what Biesta put forward as the most important aim of education, which is to make possible the emergence of unique subjects who break into a world signified by plurality. The aim is thus to make way for democratic political subjects who will form a more livable world. Consequently, the aim of education is not to contribute to social cohesion but to the
development of a plural antagonistic democracy (Biesta, 2014). Focusing on sexuality in schools, Gilbert takes a similar position, arguing that schools ought to welcome strangeness and differences between as well as within subjects and thereby embrace and develop plurality and difference rather than enforcing homogeneity and conformity (Gilbert, 2014). This calls for pedagogies that do not solely or primarily reproduce and maintain the status quo but make a plural, inclusive, and participatory future possible. Queer pedagogy could be one way to do this. Here, I believe it is important not to delimit queer as a verb to gender and sexuality. In order for subjectification to emerge, it is necessary to make trouble with a plethora of intersecting norms that exclude, marginalize, and impede students (and teachers) from developing political subjectivity (Reimers, 2017). Consequently, I agree with Gowlett, Rasmussen, and Allen (Gowlett & Rasmussen, 2014; Rasmussen & Allen, 2014) that queer pedagogy, and the concept of queer, needs to queer identity positions and norms other than those pertaining to gender and sexuality. Limiting and marginalizing norms must be breached in order to make way for subjectification.

I have suggested earlier that queer pedagogy can be seen as what Osberg and Biesta (2008) describe as emergentist pedagogy that meets up with, expects, and searches for the unforeseen (Reimers, 2010). This resonates with Sumara and Davis’ (1999) call for queer curriculum theory, which they describe as intended ‘not only to promote social justice, but to broaden possibilities for perceiving, interpreting, and representing experience’ (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 191). Defining the aim of education as opening up spaces for and enhancing differences and plurality calls for pedagogies that interrupt (hetero)normative notions about subjectivity and dominant cultural scripts for how to make sense of oneself and others. These pedagogies need to stress subjectivity as open, polyvalent, and contingent. They need to, akin to what Kumashiro states in relation to anti-oppressive education (Kumashiro, 2002), treasure disruption, refuse closure, and not dodge conflicts and challenges.

Taking their point of departure in queer theory, Sumara and Davis emphasize that subjects in schools need to be confronted with ideas, bodies, and practices that provoke them to question the default heterosexual norm (Sumara & Davis, 1999). The task of queer theory, and in this case queer pedagogy, is to make visible, critique, and subvert how and with what effects pedagogy (as well as society) is tacitly (hetero)sexualized by how some performances of the self are repeatedly rewarded whereas other performances are marginalized, questioned, or punished. Based on this, Sumara and Davis suggest a queer curriculum theory that, besides focusing on creating knowledge about how (hetero)sexuality permeates all norms and practices, emphasizes differences among persons as valuable and significant (Sumara & Davis, 1999, p. 204).

Butler’s early writings on gender and sexuality (Butler, 1993, 1999) offer a pertinent and useful foundation to think about queer pedagogy. Her conception of gender and sexual identities as unstable and continuously constructed opens up for scrutinizing how gender and sexuality are made, rather than focusing on what characterizes different gender and sexuality subjects/identities. Thus, it can facilitate exploring differing desires, ways of constructing gender, and also fear and rejection of what is perceived as ‘other’ as processes in which everybody takes part.

Before I move on to the narratives of lesbian teachers I have interviewed, I will briefly bring up an additional concept – embodiment – that is useful for making sense of LGBTQ teachers positive experiences in educational contexts. Due to the vast amount of theorizing around this concept, I was initially reluctant to use it. However, as I began to analyze
the narratives as cases – or materializations – of queer pedagogy, it became impossible to neglect the significance of embodiment (Grosz, 1994; Probyn, 2004). Bodies and embodiment are here not restricted to the physical body as an entity, even though the physicality or materiality is significant, but as processes entangled with norms, practices, emotions, and affects (Latour, 2004). Consequently, the important question is not what signifies a body, but what does a body do.

The satisfaction of working as a lesbian teacher

In the spring of 2019, I contacted the Swedish Teachers’ Union and asked if they could forward an e-mail from me to the members of their subgroup for self-identified LGBTQ teachers. The answer was positive. In the e-mail, I asked for respondents for a study of LGBTQ teachers that aimed to focus on positive aspects of their work. Twelve teachers answered my call. So far, I have conducted a pilot consisting of interviews with three self-identified lesbian teachers. By chance, all three work in preschools. For the discussion in this article, the three interviews offer ample entry points to how LGBTQ identification is useful in opening up spaces in education that interrupt and subvert the desexualized heteronormativity of schooling.

Lena is a preschool teacher student who will take her exam in the summer of 2019. She is 26 years old, and before her training, she worked on and off for several years as a childminder. She has also worked a year for the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (RFSU) as a school informant. Gunilla is 57 years old and has worked in preschools for 35 years, most of the time as a childminder and, since 2007, as a preschool teacher. Maria is 54 years old. She changed career from secretary to preschool teacher in the early 2000s and has now worked as a preschool teacher for 15 years. They all identify as lesbian, living in long-term relationships. Lena and Gunilla have children. Lena has a one-year-old child with her partner, and Gunilla has two adult children together with her partner. Maria has no children, but her partner has adult children from a previous relationship, and together they are grandmothers. Consequently, even if the three women breach the heterosexual norm in terms of the gender of their spouses, they still adhere to the nuclear family norm and to the norm of female reproduction. This might make them less offensive in light of desexualized heteronormativity than would be the case if they did not perform motherhood and monogamy (Ahmed, 2014; Butler, 2002). The reason I bring this up is that Lena and Gunilla talk about their family situation as significant for their professional position as lesbian teachers. Lena says that it is so much easier to be open and bring up issues about gender and sexuality norms when you have children. In a similar vein, Gunilla says that she decided to be open when, in 1991, she and her partner decided to have children. Living in a family with children seems to make it both easier to be open and more difficult to be closeted. The same phenomenon is reflected in how not being married and not having children makes it possible for Maria to remain closeted and still tell the truth when the children ask her if she has children or is married. She can truthfully answer no to both these questions and have her lesbian self-identification concealed by the desexualized heterosexual norm of education.
Out or closeted

It is well documented that the degree of openness of LGBTQ teachers varies from pretending to be heterosexual to being out to colleagues and students. The respondents in this study are all out to colleagues. In addition, Lena is open to the children and the parents. Gunilla begins by stating that in most cases she is open to the children but rarely to parents. This is ambiguous, however. She usually wears a rainbow belt and her phone cover and key chain also include rainbow designs. After telling me this, she changes her story to describe herself as ‘madly open at work’. Even if her LGBTQ identification not always is verbalized, it is not concealed; it is visible to anyone who chooses to look. Maria is only open to colleagues. She does not deliberately disclose her sexuality to the children, and in relation to parents, including same-sex parents, she says, ‘I want to be professional in my vocation’. Here she aligns with the norm about teachers as signified by desexualized heterosexuality. In order not to be seen as an LGBTQ teacher, she refrains from overtly disclosing anything about her private life. There is, however, at least one crack in the wall of privacy. She recounts that she senses a tacit common understanding between her and the lesbian parents who presently have a child attending her preschool.

For the respondents, even Maria, openness is important in the workplace. For them, being open is a determining factor in their ability to use and understand queerness as a pedagogical resource.

Interrupting and queering heteronormativity among colleagues

The interviewees talk about their colleagues as benevolent but ignorant in relation to gender and sexuality. This is why they find it both necessary and rewarding to educate and develop awareness about the presence and power of heteronormativity in the preschool. Both Gunilla and Lena present themselves as queer activists in relation to their work, especially in relation to their colleagues. Gunilla has acquired a position as a gender and sexuality expert. In her workplace, she has been responsible for a gender equality network, she has educated her colleagues on gender and sexuality, and she has revised forms and policies so they are more inclusive and are adapted to all parents regardless of family formation. This, she stresses, has turned out to be important for other families who do not conform to the heterosexual nuclear family norm. Her work on these issues has extended to the whole municipality, where she has been responsible for in-service education for preschool teachers and has delivered lectures to parents on gender equality and gender and sexuality norms. Lena, who is at the beginning of her work-life, has accepted invitations to train preschool personnel about LGBTQ issues from preschools where she previously worked as childminder. She sees this as part of her mission and competence, not only because of her lesbian self-identification but also because of her studies in Gender Studies. Maria is not as outspoken as the other two respondents and does not regard herself as an expert or educator on the topics of gender, sexuality, and family. To her, it is more a matter of honesty. Her way of being out consists of not making a fuss about her sexuality and thereby she contributes to a normalization of LGBTQ lives.

I find that the queering that these preschool teachers take part in is a matter of creating awareness about the extent to which the dominant norms obfuscate and marginalize differences. Gunilla recounts how she repeatedly runs into and interrupts presumptions of
heterosexuality held by parents, children, colleagues, characters in children’s books, and by friends and family members. By not letting these situations go by unnoticed, she raises awareness among her colleagues so that, together, they can develop more inclusive and welcoming practices. Lena expresses the same phenomenon, but in the context of teacher education. She says that she, unlike most others, notices how lecturers repeatedly, but probably unintentionally, come out as heterosexual by using words such as ‘my husband’. The same pertains to lecturers and literature that presume and repeat gender stereotypes or heterosexual monogamous family norms. By making her fellow students, as well as teachers, observant of these mundane practices, she creates queer moments that disrupt the heteronormative hegemony. Both Lena and Gunilla have formed specific competences to change the heterosexual norms in preschools that rely on more than their own personal identification and experiences. Lena did undergraduate work in Gender Studies and has done training with RFSU. Gunilla used her final essay in the preschool teacher program to explore research about LGBTQ families.

For Maria, queer interruptions are less deliberate and less exceptional. She works in a preschool that applies a norm-critical pedagogy. Consequently, there are continuous discussions about how norms delimit the lives and possibilities of the children as well as of parents and pedagogues. The preschool personnel take care not to use and thereby affirm stereotypical identity expressions. They refrain from calling the children ‘girls’ or ‘boys’ and from forming expectations according to gender by saying to girls that they are ‘cute’ and to boys that they are ‘tough’. Because of this norm-critical pedagogy, there is, according to Maria, not much need for her to contribute to additional awareness about queer perspectives among her peers.

**Opening up spaces for difference for the children**

The pedagogy of preschools primarily concerns the children. Referring to Biesta above, they are the ones who, in the preschool, in school, and after they have completed their education, will emerge as unique subjects who will contribute towards more liberty, equality, and plurality for all humankind. In answering my question about how the lesbian identification has influenced her choice of career, Lena immediately begins to talk about how she wants to influence the children. She says, ‘I can find a place in the lives of the children and the preschool, and demonstrate that families do not just come in one form. Give the children some other perspectives than what others might give them.’ She stresses that her presence in the preschool can prepare the children for meeting people who deviate from the heteronorm and also prepare them to recognize LGBTQ as a possible identification for themselves. Furthermore, she believes that her own queerness makes it easier for her than it is for a heterosexually identified teacher to recognize and support non-confirmative gender performances among the children. It is as if being queer implicates a sensitivity – a gay-radar – which helps to detect people who transgress heteronormativity. Gunilla does not emphasize her lesbian identification to the same extent. She wanted to work in preschools long before she came to identify as lesbian. Because of her high profile as a lesbian gender and sexuality expert, she finds the teaching situations with the children ambiguous. On the one hand, she uses situations that come up in children’s play as resources to interrupt and question the heterosexual norms. This pertains to playing family, but also to what the children consider as gender-specific...
activities and artifacts. On the other hand, she is reluctant to bring up gender issues as teaching objects during circle time because she does not want her colleagues to think that she is pursuing her own personal agenda.

For Maria, sexual identification had nothing to do with her choice to become a preschool teacher. She wanted a social job and she liked being among children. That was her motivation. However, after working for fifteen years, she recognizes that her sexuality and the life she has chosen make a difference for her job as a teacher. As recounted above, her preschool is based on norm-critical pedagogy. Consequently, interrupting norms and offering children many different ways to think, live, and perform themselves are integrated into the daily life of the preschool. This makes her position less divergent and less unique than what it is said to be for the other two respondents. Differing from Lena and Gunilla, she does not take the opportunity to tell the children about her same-sex partner even when asked. Instead, she replies that she has a friend, Susanne, whom she likes very much. For her, the queering is not in what she tells the children about gender and sexuality. It is a matter of her gender performance, about how she, as a queer woman, embodies the position of preschool teacher. Maria’s ideas on this queered my notions about queer pedagogy in the direction of embodiment rather than verbal challenges and interruptions of heteronormativity.

**Embodiments of queerness**

Interruptions and distortions of the desexualized heterosexual norm in education are not only a matter of what the teachers say about their lives, desires, partners, and family. In the case of Gunilla, they are deliberately signaled by symbols, such as different rainbow-colored artifacts. For Maria, who does not talk about her sexuality with the children, it is instead a matter of embodiment. In answer to my opening question about being an LGBTQ teacher, Maria responds:

> The children notice that there is something, but they do not know what it is. They often ask if I am a guy. Oh then, it is: ‘But how do you think then? I have breasts and a fanny just like mummy.’ ‘Yes, yes, but you have short hair.’ ‘But my colleague, she also has short hair. Is she also a guy?’ ‘No’.

> So it is something that I represent that they cannot really grasp what it is. But I am not the one who opens this by referring to what I represent, but I might become a channel, but if the issue is raised, of course I am there.

I understand this quote as an embodiment of queerness. The scene Maria refers to is not created deliberately by her. A situation emerges on the spur of the moment among the jumble of activities that constitute the daily life of the preschool. In the encounter, the children apprehend Maria as non-conforming, as a body that induces questions about gender. This is in line with Probyn (2004), who argues that non-conforming subjects become more visible in their corporality, sexuality, and deviance than conforming bodies, and that this has pedagogical implications. In the quote from Maria, the pedagogical implications are manifested in the way in which the children ask questions about her gender identity. This points to the embodied nature of teaching. It is an embodiment, which is an aspect of all interaction between teachers and students, but it goes unnoticed until it becomes visible by some sort of queering of the body norm. Maria’s gender
performance is not butch. Still, there is something in her performance of femininity that makes trouble with, or queers, the gender norms that the children typically use navigate by. Her way of acting as an embodied woman, that is, taken together, her composure, movement, dress, hairstyle, makeup (or lack of it), voice, actions, and interactions, form a gender performance that does not match the stereotypes. This uncertainty, I argue, is at the core of queer pedagogy.

The preschool teachers in this study have in common that they do not experience and consider their identity position as LGBTQ teachers as a problem. On the contrary, they all – although to different extents and in different ways – regard it as an asset for their work as teachers. To them, being outside the heterosexual norm has provided them with experiences, perspectives, interests, sensitivities, and knowledge that they bring into the educational spaces. They contribute to an open and diverse learning environment on gender and sexuality, as well as a safe and welcoming space for LGBTQ families and children. When they recount experiences of being questioned about their sexuality, the emphasis is on the support they have had from the management and their colleagues. This makes the interviews positive LGBTQ teacher narratives. Considering the vast number of accounts about the limitations and problems that LGBTQ teachers encounter, the stories from the three lesbian preschool teachers come forward as alternative stories that challenge the master narrative.

Discussion

In this article, I have presented narratives from three lesbian preschool teachers that counteract the master narrative about restrained and discriminatory work conditions for LGBTQ teachers. The result is not surprising, considering that the respondents had answered a call for positive stories from LGBTQ teachers. Like previous contributions in this field of research, I have an agenda. Whereas their agenda was to elucidate detrimental effects of heteronormativity in education for LGBTQ teachers, my agenda is to make visible LGBTQ teachers who feel affirmed, respected, and appreciated at work. We therefore approach different subjects and ask different questions. None of the perspectives are false. They simply demonstrate various aspects of the lives of LGBTQ teachers. The aim of presenting these stories is not to question the experiences and narratives of other LGBTQ teachers. There is no doubt that the desexualized heteronormativity of educational spaces have dire effects for LGBTQ teachers and students. What I want to point to is that this is not the only story, and that things can be, and in some cases are, different.

I have read the narratives through the lenses of queer pedagogy, both as an attempt to show how being a queer teacher in schools can be a positive experience, and as a contribution to the discussion about what signifies queer pedagogy. In this final section, I will draw on some threads from the interviews in relation to previous research. One such thread is the question of being out at work. Another thread is the effects of queer bodies in desexualized heteronormative educational spaces, and a third thread is the role of queer pedagogy in relation to emergences of democratic political subjectivity (Biesta, Martinsson, & Reimers, 2017).

Research has evinced that the heterosexual norm that permeates most educational spaces makes all teachers emerge as heterosexual unless there are obvious clues
indicating that this is not the case. This default heterosexuality demands that in order to escape heterosexualization, LGBTQ teachers repeatedly have to come out to students and colleagues. At the same time, the same desexualized heterosexual norm tends not only to position LGBTQ teachers as deviants; it also makes them into sexual (and dangerous) deviants. Thus, the practices of normalization and punishment that regulate bodies in schools have restraining effects for both students and teachers. Coming out as a teacher entails taking a risk and making oneself vulnerable. As several before me have stated (see Khayatt, 1999; Rasmussen, 2004), this makes celebratory discourses on coming out into pressing demands, raising tensions and hampering the teachers in their interactions with students and colleagues. At the same time, not being out contributes to difficult work conditions where the teacher has to constantly be cautious not to reveal her/himself and thereby subvert her/his authority (Gray, 2013). The teacher is positioned between a rock and a hard place, with no evident way out. Compulsory coming out can be just as oppressive as compulsory heterosexuality (cf. Shlasko, 2005). That said, in the interviews I discuss in this article, openness stands out as important not only for the teachers’ mission but also for their well-being. It is as open lesbians that Lena and Gunilla can be important sources of knowledge as well as living examples of gender and sexual diversity for both their colleagues and the children. If they were closeted, they could still promote gender and sexual diversity, but from a much weaker position. It is interesting to note that they both say that it was their position as mothers in families headed by two women that made it impossible for them to remain closeted. Thus, it can be argued that even if their family construction makes trouble with the heterosexual nuclear family norm, they are compliant with norms pertaining to femininity and motherhood, and sexuality and monogamy. In that way, it is a broken and harmless, maybe even desexualized, queerness which can be assimilated into desexualized heteronormativity. It therefore plays well into the discourses about homotolerance and institutionalized heterosexuality referred to at the beginning of the article. Maria is also out to her colleagues. However, this is not a pedagogically motivated openness. For her, it is a matter of being honest about her life in relation to peers so that she does not have to lie or monitor herself in her daily encounters. Not being out to the children does not impede her ability to instigate queer pedagogical moments. These queer moments are not brought about by what she says to the children but by how she emerges as an embodied gendered person in the interactions with the children. From this, I conclude that although being out can be an asset for queer pedagogy, it is more important to emphasize interruptions, disruptions, subversions, and unease created by queer moments.

Consequently, queer pedagogy is not predominantly a matter of informing or teaching colleagues and children/students about differences and the conditions for queer lives. The core of queer pedagogy is not to make colleagues, children/students familiar with and accepting of LGBTQ persons and lives. Stopping at that would not disturb the desexualized heterosexual norm in education. In order for queer moments to emerge, it is necessary to embody affective queerness, that is, a queerness that creates uncertainty and uneasiness, a queerness that demands responses. It is to put both the teacher and the students at risk, not knowing what will emerge. The presence of queer bodies in classrooms interrupts the dominant heterosexual norm. This is true when they claim space and legitimacy, like Lena and Gunilla above. Lena insists that her colleagues and the children become involved with the pregnancy of her partner and with her own motherhood. She
brings photos and tells stories that force the children to acknowledge and be open to
different ways of becoming a parent and forming a family. Gunilla uses familiar rainbow
symbols as tokens that provoke parents and colleagues to acknowledge the presence of
a lesbian subject in the preschool. Both these teachers use their bodily presence together
with artifacts to instigate interruptions and subversions of the heterosexual norm.
However, I find Maria’s story about how her affective embodiment of a non-
confirmative femininity evokes questions and uncertainties among the children to be
the most telling evidence of queer pedagogy in the interviews. In this example, not
revealing her sexual identity enforces the ambiguity and queerness of her body and the
situation. It evokes questions about her gendered identity, what is possible and who one
might become. Being out or not is of course important for the individual LGBTQ teacher,
and I do agree with the three respondents that it is most likely easier to be a contented
and relaxed teacher when there is no need to constantly monitor oneself in order not to
reveal one’s sexuality. However, not openly claiming a queer identity and thereby per-
forming a queer possibility might create stronger prerequisites for queer pedagogy.

If educators, in line with Biesta’s propositions, want their students to emerge as unique
subjects that will make a difference and contribute to a world signified by equality, liberty, and
diversity, queer pedagogy is important. Based on my own experiences, as well as the inter-
views recounted above, identifying as an LGBTQ teacher offers possibilities to perform such
a pedagogy. Many of us have experiences – in our bodies – of negligence, marginalization,
discrimination, or worse. As positioned as outside, deviant, and as ‘the other’, we learn to be
observant of the effects of normalization in relation to gender and sexuality. Like other
minority subjects and identity positions – in relation to race, ableness, religion, age – LGBTQ
teachers do not fit with the dominant norms about embodiments and performances of
teacher identities. Instead, using the concept from Muñoz (1999), they disidentify with
norms about teacher identities. In not being able to identify with the hegemonic norms,
they evince the delimiting effects of these norms and form spaces for ambiguity. This is
a pedagogical resource that can be used to instigate queer moments of uncertainty, distress,
plurality, and conflict (cf. Osberg & Biesta, 2008). This demands a willingness to take, as Biesta
puts it, ‘the beautiful risk of education’ (Biesta, 2014). Embodying non-normative teacher
identities, LGBTQ teachers not only put themselves at risk, but also simultaneously form
spaces where students – by the ambiguity of the situation – can emerge as subjects in
unforeseen ways. The significance of non-normative teacher subjects is not only a matter of
gender and sexuality. In a Swedish educational context, Muslim bodies in niqab, racialized
bodies, and disabled bodies are also likely to produce moments of dissonance, ambiguity, and
uncertainty. Together with LGBTQI teacher bodies, teacher bodies constituted as deviant
based on other or additional norms not only make visible, interrupt, and subvert hierarchical
relations and oppressive situations, they offer students and teachers plural ways of becoming
human.

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**Notes on contributor**

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