

# Heterosexual discourse and the experiences of queer students in Icelandic upper secondary schools

## Short abstract

The main aim of the project is to describe and analyze the discursive factors that contribute to the heterosexist ideology – values and customs – within school settings both at individual and institutional level – i.e. micro and meso levels of schools. In this research project I will study in what ways these factors manifest themselves in the upper secondary school. The upper secondary school experience of queer students (Lesbian gays bisexuals and transgender) and how they negotiate their existence within its environment will also be a major focus of the research. This has not been researched much abroad (Couch, 2009) and there are almost no studies on this matter in Iceland. As a matter of fact few studies within the educational science in Iceland focus on the upper secondary school settings (Gestur Guðmundsson, 2009). In addition I will look into the social strategies that queer students use to come to terms with themselves and their environment. This is in fact, the other side of the concept of heterosexism, i.e. how the affected individuals respond to it. More knowledge about this will be helpful for teachers, consultants and policy makers. Finally the role of space – both physical and subjective – and its influences on queer students will be studied.

## Extended description

### 1. Introduction

#### Purpose:

There are four main objectives:

*Theoretical objective:* This can be divided into two objectives: Firstly I will introduce queer theory to the educational science in Iceland, which forms the frame of this research and will be used as an overall theory and perspective through my thesis. Secondly I will explore whether theories within sociology can be applied when analyzing the data.

*Descriptive and analytical objective:* Here I will describe/analyze the experience of queer (LGBT) students within upper secondary schools and the discursive factors that contribute to the heterosexist ideology. In addition it will be explored how queer students negotiate their existence within school settings.

*Informative objective:* The state of queer students in upper secondary school has so far received little attention in Icelandic educational research and almost none in educational policy. The aim here is therefore to increase the knowledge of queer students within the educational system and to inform teachers, counsellors and policy makers about their situation.

*Emancipatory objective:* This is an underlying objective of my thesis. The aim here is to find ways to improve conditions for queer students within the educational system. This will then further promulgate the ideas of “upper secondary school for everyone” as stressed in The National Curriculum (Menntamálaráðuneytið, 2004).

#### Research Questions and description:

The research will focus on upper secondary school settings and the heterosexist discourse within them: physical, verbal, textual, conversational and pictorial discourse (Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson, 2004). Researches on the matter (Buston & Hart, 2001; Epstein, 1994; Herek, 2004) have revealed schools to be rather heteronormative or heterosexist, i.e. assuming that everyone within its settings is heterosexual. The pilot study conducted by Jón Ingvar Kjarran and Ingólfur Ásgeir Jóhannesson (2010) also indicated this, i.e. that institutionalized heterosexism prevails in the structure and culture of the school under investigation. This means that the hegemonic school culture and structure – that can be depicted as a discourse – is characterized by heterosexist values and customs. This in turn can be stressful and difficult for queer students both for those who are open about their same sex desire, but also for those students that are still questioning their sexuality. This fact and the results of the studies conducted abroad stress the importance to study this phenomenon of institutionalized heterosexism further, to be able to map the forms of its manifestations, both overt and subtle. To be able to do that the project will focus on four main research questions:

The four main research questions are the following:

- i) How do cultural, structural and other elements within the upper secondary school system/settings reflect heterosexism? How does heterosexism manifest itself within the upper secondary school environment?
- ii) How do queer students experience the upper secondary school, its environment and culture?
- iii) How do queer students face up to their sexuality and how do they negotiate their existence within the school environment and adapt to the assumed heterosexist ideology – values, customs and norms – of the upper secondary school? In other words, what social strategies do they use?
- iv) What is the role of space, both objective (physical) and subjective (non-physical) when it comes to heterosexism and the well-being of queer students?

#### Scholarly Methods/Approach

The main theoretical and epistemological approach of the project will be queer theory. It is both critical and political, in the sense that one of its main objectives is to influence or “queer” prevailing norms and social structure. Queer theory developed from critical feminism in the 1990s and has since been applied in various research projects abroad (see Jagose, 1996). In Iceland it has rarely been used.

The research design will consist of two types of case studies: double site study and multiple case studies or interview studies. This design will be supported with ethnographic observations at the sites of the two schools that will be chosen for the research. The data collected from these cases and sites will be grouped into three categories: interview data collected by the researcher with the help of semi-structured interview guide, field notes from ethnographic observations at the two schools (sites) and published/unpublished material (documents) collected by using discourse analysis, both content and critical discourse analysis. This data will then be analyzed by using hermeneutics for the interview data and critical discourse analysis along with content analysis when the published/unpublished material and the field notes will be studied.

These different sets of data that will be collected and analyzed as described above will then give answers to the four research questions that were put forward in the last section. The interview data will mainly be used to shed light on the experience of LGBT-students (Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) but it will also contribute to answering the other three questions. The published/unpublished material (documents, students’ newspapers etc.) will mainly give answers to first and third research questions, whereas field notes from ethnographic observations will mainly focus on the fourth research question.

By using diverse types of data and applying different methods for the collection and analysis (triangulation) will in our view give the research more validity. This will then enable us to give answer to the four research questions and thereby shed light on the main topic (title) of the project, i.e. heterosexual discourse and the experiences of queer students in Icelandic upper secondary schools.

## 2. Academic/Scientific Value (with reference to other theoretical and/or empirical work in the field).

In Iceland there is not a long tradition of researching topics concerning sexual minorities (LGBT). Few studies have been undertaken and their theoretical approach has rarely taken into account recent developments abroad, i.e. queer theory or gay and lesbian studies. This means that concepts, methods and critical stand of recent works conducted abroad on sexual minorities has in many cases not been applied in Icelandic research on LGBT-issues (LGBT: Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender).

During the last two decades a few studies have been conducted and articles written about the situation of queer (LGBT) individuals in Iceland. First comprehensive account about the situation of gays and lesbians was made by the Office of the Prime Minister. It was in a form of two reports, published in 1994 and 2004 (Forsætisráðuneytið, 1994, 2004). In a chapter about the education and the school system both reports emphasized the need for some actions to ensure that queer teachers and students would feel good and safe within the schools. In addition they stressed the need for measures to increase the visibility of queer individuals within schools and in the national curriculum.

Both these reports advocated further research on the situation of gays and lesbians in Icelandic society. Within science of education a few research appeared after the first report in 1994, mostly focusing on the primary/elementary school (see Hrönn Bessadóttir, Ingibjörg Ósk Pétursdóttir, Krístrún Sigurgeirsdóttir, 2003; Sara Dögg Jónsdóttir, 2005; Kristín Elva Viðarsdóttir and Sif Einarsdóttir, 2006). An exception is a master's thesis by Guðmundur P. Ásgeirsson, which formed the basis for the book *Með hnút í maganum*, which depicts in detail the difficulties that face those who want to "come out" (Guðmundur Páll Ásgeirsson, 1999). Being a valuable contribution to the study of queer students/youth, his research scope is however quite limited to the categories of gays and lesbians, only mentioning slightly transgender and bisexual individuals. In addition the author does not apply queer theory or uses recent theories and works within gay and lesbian studies.

In addition to above mentioned research/publications about same sex desires and the school environment/educational system, some books and articles have been published discussing the topic more generally and from various viewpoints. Several articles have been published on the webpage of *Samtökin 78* (The National Queer Organization), addressing different aspects of queer issues. An edited book was published in 2003 about homosexuality and family life. Various authors contributed to it, writing about different topics (Rannveig Traustadóttir and Þorvaldur Kristinsson, 2003). Sigrún Sveinbjörnsdóttir article in this book is interesting. It addresses the hostile and homophobic environment that queer youth encounters when they come out of the closet. They are more likely of developing risky behavior, e.g. drug abuse or commit suicide. According to Sigrún Sveinbjörnsdóttir schools and the educational system in general should address this problem and offer lectures and information about homosexuality to staff members and students. This should reduce prejudices towards gays and lesbians and hopefully improve the position of queer students in the near future (Sigrún Sveinbjörnsdóttir, 2003).

Abroad, mainly in the English speaking world, the literature on topics concerning LGBT issues is rather extensive. Within the educational sector, studies on LGBT-students, school environments etc. have increased since the 1980s. Most of these researches have been conducted in the English speaking world, mainly in USA, UK and Australia. In Canada there has also been considerable growth within this field of study, also in the French speaking part. Various theories have been applied and their approaches differ considerably (Tierney and Dilley, 1998).

The project (research) will draw on these different research conducted abroad, mainly where the themes/approaches shed light on students' background and aforementioned heterosexist and heteronormative values within high school (upper secondary school) settings. It will contribute to the growing body of knowledge within this field of research by giving it an Icelandic dimension. It will also create some new knowledge that can have transnational value. The academic/scientific value of the project will be summarized below.

The project will:

1. Increase the academic discourse in Iceland about queer students (individuals).
2. Contribute to a limited scientific knowledge of the situation of queer students in Iceland and queer studies (LGBT-studies) in general.
3. Add new information to the growing body of knowledge abroad about queer students by giving that discourse an Icelandic perspective. This will be done by publishing peer reviewed articles in international journals and giving lectures at international conferences. One peer reviewed article in the Icelandic web-journal *Netla* (see [www.netla.is](http://www.netla.is)) has appeared.
4. Contribute to the rather few or limited research on the secondary school in Iceland – especially in terms of issues of inequality and oppression.
5. Develop further and give the sociological concepts of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu a new dimension, by applying them when analyzing the experience of queer students, i.e. coining the term queer capital.
6. Intersect different social categories like gender, sexuality, economic class and location when analyzing/collecting the data.
7. Test the applicability of queer theory, i.e. whether queer students perceive of their queer identity as fixed or fluid, whether they subscribe to sexual categories or resist them.

Secondly it will test the applicability of queer theory, i.e. whether queer students perceive of their queer identity as fixed or fluid, whether they subscribe to sexual categories or resist them.

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