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# Watching six-packs, chilling together, spreading rumours: enacting heteronormativity through secondary school friendships and teaching practices

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which heteronormativity is enacted through friendships and teaching practices in and around secondary schools. Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in three schools in the Netherlands, it describes heteronormativity as relational and situational. Among pupils, heteronormativity was presupposed yet also made in practices of forming, consolidating or ending friendships. Relations between teachers and pupils showed heteronormativity to be differentiated across contexts: in two schools heterosexuality was drawn upon to ease teaching relations, while at a third school it was seen as a hindrance to academic achievement and therefore relegated to the private sphere. Arguing that heteronormativity is enacted in realms of social life that are often desexualised, those of friendship and pedagogy, this paper breaks with the tendency to produce singular accounts of heteronormativity and its effect in schools.

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## Introduction

In the Netherlands, a bestselling book marketed to pupils anxious about transitioning from primary to secondary school focuses on ‘how to survive’ the first year. The elaborate advice of the author revolves around how to find and keep friends (Oomen 2015). Secondary school is described by youths themselves first and foremost as ‘a place for meeting friends’ (Lahelma 2002), and the transition from primary to secondary school ignites worries over friendships in pupils (Pratt and George 2005). Interestingly, friendship is attended to frequently in studies of primary schools (see for example Duits 2008; Bruegel 2006), whereas ethnographies of secondary school more often focus on sexuality, particularly the influence of heteronormativity (Martino 1999; Pascoe 2007; Ringrose 2013). While a few texts explicitly engage with sexuality in primary school (Kuik 2013; Renold 2005), there remains little engagement with how friendships are lived in secondary school (but see Hey 1997 for an exception).

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This paper questions this apparent analytical separation of friendship and sexuality and attends to their relatedness through an ethnographic study based in secondary schools in the Netherlands. It highlights how heteronormativity is enacted through friendships and teaching practices in and around secondary schools. The paper takes up, first, the suggestion that heteronormativity might not only regulate gendered and sexual identity constitution but also work in other domains of social life as well (Jackson 2006). It focuses on domains that are often seen as asexual, namely those of friendship and pedagogy. A second point of departure is the 'un-believing' of the heterosexual matrix (Atkinson and DePalma 2009) as 'just the way things are' in secondary schools. Instead of starting from the assumption that schools are heteronormative by default, it will trace how heteronormativity is enacted differently across various schools and situations.

## Sexuality and friendship

Studies often primarily analyse friendships in secondary schools in relation to how a gendered/sexualised identity is performed (see for example Pascoe 2007; Ringrose 2013). When attention to friendship is paid, heteronormativity is seen to 'get in the way' of boy-girl friendships, as these quickly become cast in terms of heterosexuality (Pascoe 2007; Renold 2005). Furthermore, attractiveness to the other sex can become a marker of popularity among those of the same sex (Duncan 2004; Duncan and Owens 2011). These indications of the importance of heteronorms in the splitting of friendship groups into boys and girls, as well as in setting up a hierarchy of popularity, raise questions about whether and how heteronormativity structures friendship practices. Thus, the focus here is on the different means and effects of heteronormativity, including its importance in the consolidation of friendships (Atkinson and DePalma 2009).

School is also a place that is shared with teachers. Though many studies have identified schools and classrooms as arenas for the construction of gender and sexuality, attention to the role of teachers in this process has been relatively limited (Francis and Skelton 2001). Recently, some studies interested in countering homophobia in classrooms have focused on teachers (DePalma and Atkinson 2010) and how they can effectively challenge homophobic remarks and behaviours. As teachers are not only responsible for conveying a certain curriculum, but also for limiting the range of movements and behaviours of their pupils (Nespor 1997), their policing of gender and sexuality have been well documented (Garcia 2009; Kehily 2002; Martino and Frank 2006). The ways in which their everyday teaching relations rely on and produce heteronormativity, however, have been relatively underexplored. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in three secondary schools in the Netherlands, this paper examines heteronormativity in relation to friendship and teaching practices in schools.

## Normalising heterosexuality

The notion of heteronormativity refers to a pervasive, often invisible norm of heterosexuality (Warner 1991) that assumes a binary conception of sex (male/female), corresponding gender expression (masculine/feminine), and a natural attraction to the opposite sex (heterosexuality). This 'heterosexual matrix' (Butler 1990) renders alternative sexualities 'other' and marginal. It describes 'not only a normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life' (Jackson 2006, 17) that regulates those within as well as outside of its bounds.

Schools have been described as ‘hegemonically heterosexual’ (Batsleer 2012), characterised as oppressive and tense spaces where ‘heterosexuality is the ever-present, regulating influence in classrooms’ (Ryan 2016, 79), and as invisibly structured by heteronormativity (DePalma and Atkinson 2010). This heteronormative structure silences or disparages queer sexualities (Ryan 2016) and is seen as in need of being ‘tackled’ (Sauntson and Simpson 2011). Furthermore, heteronormativity has been described as an implicit moral framework (Vinjamuri 2015), or an ideology (Yep 2002), that ‘hurts everyone’ (Knight et al. 2013). Paradoxically, despite its constructionist roots, the concept is thus increasingly presented in a realist framework in which schools are heteronormative spaces: this fact has become a starting point of analysis and research.

This paradox has led some scholars to revise their use of the heterosexual matrix concept. Atkinson and DePalma (2009, 17), importantly, wonder whether ‘through naming and believing the heterosexual matrix and identifying evidence of its operation, we reify, reinforce and reinscribe it, even as we attempt to subvert, unsettle or deconstruct it’. The metaphor of the matrix, they explain, implies an image of a structure ‘out there’ that constructs its subjects. Several others have commented on the possibility that the critique of heteronormativity itself reifies the phenomenon. Jackson (2006), for example, suggests ‘to say that a phenomenon such as heterosexuality or gender is normative ... may prove to be overly deterministic’ (109). Similarly, warning against simplifying or reifying heteronormativity, Butler (2006) observes that studies often describe merely two options: either subjects submit to the heteronorm or escape it. Though the use of the concept of the heterosexual matrix has been extensive, Butler has discontinued using the term precisely because it ‘became a kind of totalizing symbolic’ (Butler, Osborne, and Segal 1994, 36). To allow for an investigation of heteronormativity as a collective process, DePalma and Atkinson (2010) suggest ‘un-believing the matrix’ as a starting point for ethnographic explorations of sexuality in schools.

This paper takes seriously these considerations and wants to avoid an interpretation of heteronormativity as an anterior and universal reality, independent of the people and practices within them. Instead, it builds on the work of scholars that reveals the multiple manifestations and effects of heteronormativity (see for example Bustos 2017; Jackson 2006; Mak 2015) in order to analyse how heteronormativities are enacted in schools. The objective is twofold: to understand how heteronormativity functions in relation to friendships and teaching relations and, in turn, to understand how heteronormativity is generated through friendship and teaching practices in school contexts.

## The study

This paper is based on an ethnographic study in three schools in the Netherlands, which were selected because they were diverse in educational level and geographic location. These schools are situated within and outside the Randstad, which is the region encompassing the four largest cities in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Utrecht), where, it is estimated, 7 out of the 16 million people in the Netherlands live. The Randstad is also the part of the country where most studies are being conducted, based on the assumption that most social problems, including those that relate to sexuality, can be found in these urban areas (Krebbekx, Spronk, and M’charek 2017). To be able to contrast schools, one was situated within (Nexus High)<sup>1</sup> and two outside of the

Randstad (Rijnsberg College and Bernarduslyceum). The latter ones were more welcoming of me as a researcher, as they were less burdened with requests to participate in similar studies and for organisational reasons. My presence there could therefore also be slightly more continuous than in the two other schools in which a stricter start and end date of the research were negotiated.

The Dutch system for secondary education is divided into three levels: pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO, subdivided into three levels), general secondary education (Havo), and pre-university education (VWO, divided into athenaeum and gymnasium). Despite a commitment to 'equal opportunities', the Dutch system has some unintended consequences: the influence of family background is higher in differentiated systems, thus countering the democratising function of schooling (Netjes et al. 2011; Van Daalen 2010). The separation between tracks can lead to 'racially and socioeconomically segregated schools' (Paulle 2013, 9), in which pre-vocational schools are attended predominantly by children with a working-class or ethnic minority background, whereas pre-university schools are more likely to be attended mostly by white pupils with an upper- or middle-class background.

Data used in this paper derive from three schools: two are pre-vocational schools and the third offers general secondary and pre-university education. In this third school I followed a class in the pre-university track. The classes that were studied were for students in year 2 or 3, and pupils ranged in age from 14 to 17. Over the course of 15 months, I observed and participated in classes, lunch breaks, and many informal conversations, as well as the occasional school trip or party. I also conducted, recorded, and transcribed 20 more formal interviews in which I asked groups of pupils to explain situations in school that I had observed. In this article I draw mostly on observations, as these privilege practices, whereas interviews give priority to narrative (Thomson, Bragg, and Kehily 2018). The vignettes and interview excerpts presented here highlight different ways that the workings of heteronormativity unfold within educational environments.

To be able to tease out these differences across the schools, I first briefly describe each school. At Rijnsberg College, a pre-vocational school with about 300 pupils, there was an atmosphere of light-heartedness and playfulness. A high level of connectedness characterised the school: most teachers knew the first names of the majority of pupils. Many of the pupils that were in class together had known each other before, through primary school, sports memberships, or family or neighbourhood connections. Nexus High, the second school, was a relatively new school for pre-vocational education, and distinguished itself from other schools in the region by emphasising sports and personal development to enhance the talents of their pupils. It served 1400 pupils in a large and modern building that encompassed a recording studio and many athletic facilities, and was decorated with prizes won by previous pupils and pictures of alumni who had become local or national celebrities. The third school, Bernardus Lyceum, is a school for general secondary and pre-university education. The oldest of the secondary schools in a medium-sized city, it had a reputation of being old-fashioned and somewhat elitist: it was mainly attended by children who came from a higher working class and middle-class background. The school's popularity has decreased slightly in recent years, though at the time of this study it was attended by approximately 1300 pupils, still close to building's maximum capacity.

In each school, I was assigned to one class, which I followed for several days a week over the course of a semester. The choices of which classes to study were mostly made by school administrators based on their knowledge of the group and the class teacher. Being assigned to a particular class meant that I followed the pupils around through classes, breaks, and events. Creating rapport with pupils also involved showing on many occasions that I could be trusted. I never opposed gossiping or joking about teachers when I heard it, sometimes being complicit in it by winking or raising an eyebrow. Similarly, there were many cases in which I saw the copying of homework or cheating during exams; in advance of the fieldwork, I had negotiated with school administrators that I would not report on such things but would report if something severe was going on that the school was unaware of.<sup>2</sup> Written consent from pupils was obtained, and I ensured they knew they could withdraw their permission at any time. Parents were informed about my research and were given the option to exclude their child from participation, though no one did so.

At times, my presence was questioned by pupils, but the longer I was there, the more accustomed they became to me. I occupied a liminal position for them: I had finished secondary school but was still in university and had not yet entered 'adulthood', which they associated with having a permanent job, being married, owning a house and, ultimately, being a parent – none of which applied to me. Pupils mostly referred to me as an intern: I resembled the young interns, most of whom were female and white, that they were used to seeing in their classrooms from time to time.

### Consolidating friendship: watching six-packs, drinking beer

While many of the participants mentioned having at least one friend outside of the school, most students' friends were their classmates and the friends they spent the most time with, inside as well as outside of the school. Friendships foster a sense of belonging (Dyson 2010; Hey 1997; Pratt and George 2005), or, as one informant explained to me: 'in school it is just important that you are not by yourself'. This concern with not moving through the school alone but being with others was voiced often. But what is exactly being done and said in moments of being together among friends?

In one of the physical education classes that I observed at Rijnsberg College, five friends had distanced themselves from the sports activities and gathered on a bench nearby. Sitting closely together, wearing identical school PE uniforms, they were bent over to watch the screen of Priscilla's phone. When pulling out her phone, which she had secretly smuggled into the PE hall in her bra, Priscilla proposed that they 'watch six-packs on Hot-or-Not'. Laughter ensued while doing so, and the girls took turns glancing at teacher Inge, making sure their defection from the PE class was not noticed. Later, in a group interview, I asked them about the smartphone application 'Hot or Not'.

Jenna:	Hot-or-Not. Well then, you get ...
Mieke:	Let Kelly tell it!
Kira:	I don't play that game
Jenna:	I will tell
Brianna:	And I will add
Jenna:	You make an account and someone else too
Daisy:	With Facebook

- Jenna: Yes, with Facebook  
[laughter]
- Jenna: You can put pictures online and you can choose women or men, and up to what age, and then you get to see a lot of pictures, and then you can press 'cross' or 'heart'. Cross is that you turn down that person, and heart is that you think that person is nice and handsome.
- [all in the background while Jenna talks: woooooo]
- Willemijn: And can the other person see what you have pressed?
- Brianna: Yes, [but] only if he liked you [too].

The 'six-pack', a colloquial term used to refer to well-defined abdominal muscles, has become an important element of boys' social media presence (Allen, Harvey, and Mendick 2015; Harvey, Ringrose, and Gill 2013; Leurs 2012; Naezer 2018), and visible muscularity a signifier of masculinity (Drummond and Drummond 2015). In the game played by the girls, the signifier 'six-pack' is recognised as legitimating the 'heterosexual female gaze' (Gill 2009). While one could say that the four girls are engaging principally in a session of 'gazing', their looking at boys' bodies is instrumental not only in constituting them as heterosexual girls but also consolidating their friendship. This is amplified through the secrecy and the physical closeness of their bodies, fostering homosociality. The shared attraction to boys' bodies constitutes the girls as heterosexual, and at the same time facilitates intimate bonding among girls, contributing to their friendship. Although set up as a dating application, there was no intention of dating among these girls – it was about watching pictures and counting how many times someone had a 'match'. Only once did one of them respond to a message of a 'match', but she quickly stopped the conversation and deleted this contact, as he was 'talking dirty'. 'Hot-or-Not' was referred to as a 'game', which has more social and less romantic or sexual connotations. Heterosexual attraction, implied in the 'boy-watching' by girls, and in the boy-girl mode of the game that was selected, was functional in this practice of friendship, and the joy that arose from playing this 'game' linked laughter and intimacy. In the conversation in which I asked about this game, the girls giggled together and finished each other's sentences, thereby demonstrating their being 'in-tune' which further consolidated their friendship (Coates 2007).

This consolidating of friendship also happened one day when a teacher called in sick in the morning. The first two hours were cancelled for the class at Rijnsberg College, and about 12 pupils went to Zoe's house 'to chill'.

Arriving at Zoe's place, the group enters the cabin in the backyard that houses a bar with liquor on top, a dartboard, and is decorated with pictures of fishing trips of Zoe's father and his friends. Hanging out in the cabin in the backyard, it was not long before Damian asked Zoe for a beer, which she gives to him. The cabin is crowded, some people sit on each other's lap or on the armrests and the group seems to be a bit hesitant about what to do next. It is cold on this November morning, and the girls go inside. When I go and see what is happening in the cabin a bit later, I find all the boys are now drinking beer or are trying some of the liquor from the bar. Meanwhile, they are singing vulgar and homophobic songs, playing darts ('the cunts' against 'the gays', reads the scoreboard), and engaging in physical horseplay. The atmosphere signals excitement about the illicit drinking, and

increasing worry about returning to school for class: some boys breathe repeatedly in each other's (and my) faces to check whether the alcohol can be detected. Back at school, a teacher realised Damian and Justin had consumed alcohol, as they did not walk straight and were exceptionally loud. They were called to the principal's office and got suspended for the rest of the day. (Field notes, R1)

An unexpected morning in school led to a group of pupils hanging out at Zoe's place. In the cabin, though, it was unclear what exactly the group should do: pupils appeared restless and unsure on how to do what they call 'chilling'. When Damian started drinking, the girls decided to go inside, splitting the group into boys and girls. The boys then drank alcohol and started playing darts, whereas the girls, inside, drank soda and ate crisps while watching and commenting on music videos. Drinking alcohol has been described as a pleasurable friendship practice – 'a social pleasure rather than an individual experience' (Niland et al. 2013), and this is what happened in the cabin in the garden: there was a constant conversation about feeling and smelling the effects of alcohol, and, among those inside, a conversation about the drinking boys. It constituted these boys as 'out of line' teenagers who did crazy things with friends. The performative practices of heteronormative masculinity, through physical horseplay and using sexist and homophobic terms for the dart teams, reiterated gendered stereotypes. The separation of the boys from the girls and the 'gays' as abject other (Butler 1990) in talk and play consolidated heteromascularity and allowed the boys to be physically intimate at the same time.

The incident became a story that was told over and over again. Some pupils, two years later at the graduation ceremony, jokingly asked me, 'Do you remember that one time we were drunk during school[hours]?', highlighting this particular instance as a formative moment in their schoolyears. Such storytelling is a powerful way of 'doing friendship' through which boys 'display connectedness with each other, while at the same time telling stories of heroism or laddishness which construct and maintain hegemonic masculinity' (Coates 2008, 105). Both of these vignettes show how the joy, laughter, and consolidation of bonds among friends were presupposing as well as enacting heterosexuality. Paechter (2015) suggests understanding this as partly arising 'from belonging, from inserting oneself into a heterosexually constructed gender, shared with older children and with adults' (12). In the next section, I shift attention to moments when such joy and laughter is absent.

## **Discontinuing friendships: gossip and distancing**

Jenna transferred to Rijnsberg College at the beginning of the school year. She started dating a boy who lived in a nearby city and was fully consumed by her new love, chatting with him on her smartphone almost non-stop. This was going on for about three weeks when one morning in class, I saw that she was crying.

Jayden shouts: 'Jenna is not happy today because she has had an abortion!!' Jenna snaps: 'Act normal!', and leaves the classroom. I share a desk with Leslie and Manon. Manon asks Leslie, 'Is it true, did she have an abortion?' Leslie does not know. Later, Manon tells me she knows what happened: 'Priscilla said Jenna was pregnant. But that's what you get when you are new'. Later that day, I ask Priscilla, who is one of Jenna's best friends, what was going on. She tries to avoid answering and tells me with a nervous giggle that it was 'nothing' and 'just a joke'. (Field notes, R2)



The joke resulted in Jenna's sexual behaviour becoming the central topic of conversation in class. Jenna got upset, left the classroom crying, and called in the help of the teacher. Priscilla was well aware of the effects of her 'joke', as she seemed very nervous when I asked her what was going on: she was blushing, giggling, and avoiding the question. Spreading the abortion rumour functioned as a warning to Jenna to not ignore her friends at the expense of her boyfriend and to stay in line with the rest of the girls in the group, who were sexually inexperienced.

Manon's remark – 'that's what you get when you are new' – indicates that such jokes that police sexuality and femininity are not a rarity and might be part of forging new friendships. A few months later, Jenna befriended another group of girls, from a different class. When the schedule allowed for it, she spent her breaks with the new group of friends who became her primary friends. The fight that revolved around Jenna's recent sexual and romantic relation shows that sexual regulation of femininity became part and parcel of them being a group of female friends (see also Renold 2005; Hey 1997; Kehily 2002).

This centrality of sexuality is not exclusive to girls. During a group interview on friendship, five pupils of Rijnsberg College explained why Damian was not part of their group:

- Anthony: But ... how shall I say it, he acts much older than we are  
 Timmy: Yes  
 Paul: How shall I put it, he is much further –  
 Roberto: He turned 14  
 Paul: Well, you don't really see that. But to us ... He says to us ... . Yes. I don't know if I can say this but ...  
 Anthony: Yes. Yes –  
 Paul: Yes, but anyway. He is ... . His sex world is waaaaay waaay further than we are.  
 Timmy: Yesss  
 Paul: And, smoking  
 Willemijn: Yes ...  
 Paul: And well, I do it as well sometimes.  
 Timmy: Smoking?  
 Paul: [No] but he drives a scooter almost every day, on the road. With him it is like ... People just think let him go [...] it is his own life.  
 Timmy: He will end up badly.

When Paul confided that Damian was 'further in his sex world', the others added that he was out of line and 'acted older' in relation to smoking and driving a scooter as well. At school, Damian regularly boasted about having sex. This sparked questions from the other boys: he became a resource on sexuality, pregnancy prevention, and the female body, someone whose information the other boys used to become sexually knowledgeable. They listened to him carefully, while at the same time emphasising the difference in sexual experience between Damian and themselves. Although the boys in this group interview seemed hesitant to share information about Damian with me, their strategy of saying 'how shall I say it ... I don't know if I can say it' effectively made sure the others' whispering stopped and everyone listened carefully to what Paul had to say. In their description of Damian, the boys drew upon the idea of sexuality as conceptualised in stages ('being further') that are related to age ('he behaves much older'). Also, linking sexuality, smoking and driving a scooter, they make clear that while they are interested in his actions, they are different 'kinds' of boys. For these boys, Damian's performance of

hegemonic masculinity through sexual activity was something fascinating, but also something to keep at a distance. For Priscilla and her friends, Jenna's sexual behaviour was something they heavily policed – resulting in Jenna being alone in the school. These relational complexities of youth sexualities (Gilbert et al. 2017; Krebbekx 2018) reflect gendered reputational consequences of sexual activity.

### Teaching relationships: drawing on or excluding gender and heterosexuality

Although most analyses of sexuality and gender have focused on pupils, teachers are by no means exempt from the workings of these categories. Francis and Skelton (2001) argue that teachers construct gendered identities in the classroom, for example by disciplining boys through questioning their masculinity. Male teachers, they continue, use their relations with pupils to confirm their own masculinity, by 'positioning themselves as "one of the lads" with the boys in the class' or by 'positioning themselves as "other" to girls, non-masculine boys, and all things feminine' (Francis and Skelton 2001, 14). As opposed to studies that find that sexuality is explicitly kept 'outside' of the classroom (for example Allen 2007), teachers as well as pupils in the two pre-vocational schools that I studied often actively drew on sexuality in their teaching practices and relations to establish an amicable bond or to draw attention to the educational materials, as the following examples of each school show. I present three different ways that heterosexuality unfolded in pupil-teacher relations and teaching practices: to find common ground or similarities, to grab the attention of a pupil before going into a class assignment, or to assist in the estimation of someone's academic potential.

To celebrate the end of the school year at Rijnsberg College, the class had dinner at the local Chinese restaurant.

When most of the pupils have left, I change seats to the middle of the table, joining some teachers and pupils in a conversation on 'players'.<sup>3</sup> One of the teachers, Simon, while looking at Damian, says: 'I think there is just one player here'. Damian recounts proudly that 'first I had [a relationship] with Esmee. Then with Tamara. Then with Evi. And then again with Esmee'. He smiles. One of the teachers, Bas, asks: 'Who is the one who breaks up?' Damian answers proudly: 'It's always me!' Damian's friend Justin adds: 'Esmee, you know the one with the snake movements from that nude clip'. The others at the table nod to indicate their recognition of the girl and the clip. (Fieldwork excerpt, R3)

After dinner, the conversation among the men and boys present turned to Damian's sexual relationships. This collective enactment of masculinity provided a way for the teachers to build rapport with their male students and to cross generational boundaries (Pascoe 2007). Asking about girlfriends and 'being a player' strengthened the relationship between Simon and Damian, highlighting and confirming a particular hegemonic form of masculinity that united these boys and men in opposition to women and girls. Girls were seen here only in relation to having romantic/sexual relations with Damian, which was most pronounced when Esmee was mentioned: she was referred to as the one who had danced in her bedroom naked, captured on a webcam, the clip of which had spread throughout the school.

The practice of drawing on sexuality to establish a relationship with a pupil also took place inside of classrooms, as the following field note shows.

Daya notified class teacher Mascha as soon as she walked into the classroom at Nexus High: 'Miss, your tights are damaged!' Mascha replies: 'I know, thanks hun'. The class, consisting of 14 pupils, will be working individually on a number of tasks during today's class. Intern Nathalie walks around the classroom to assist pupils where needed. When Nathalie arrives with the girls who sit in front of me she teasingly says to one of them: 'I have a boy in my other class that is into you'. A back and forth in which Daya tries to find out who it is follows. Nathalie does not want to tell, and Daya gives up, saying, 'Well, I just hope it is not a *tata*'.<sup>4</sup> Ignoring the remark, Nathalie smilingly asks about the assignment Daya is working on. (Field notes, N1)

Through attention to clothes and confiding information about the (possible) sexual interest of boys, a shared identity as (heterosexual) women is established. It works to decrease the power and age imbalance that exists between teachers (or interns) and pupils, and is strategically used by Nathalie to gain attention before asking about their assignment. In both instances, in the restaurant as well as the classroom, the opposition between teacher (adult, powerful) and pupil (child, submissive) is being reduced through establishing amicable relationships by drawing on heterosexuality.

At Bernarduslyceum, in the pre-university track, a different use of sexuality was at work. Here, when sexuality was invoked by teachers, it was often positioned as being at odds with academic achievements. This becomes clear when we look at how teachers dealt with hair brushing, a common practice among many girls in the schools studied, as the most popular hairstyle for girls during the time of this study was long and straight.

A group of girls at Bernarduslyceum seemed very invested in their appearance: at the start of almost every class, when the pupils were finding their place, settling in, and the teacher was setting up to start the class, girls checked their hair and make-up. Often a quick glance in the mirror (or in the selfie mode of their phone's camera) and a few rearrangements of hair and re-application of lip balm were made. In the morning, though, after arriving to school by bike, hair brushing was more common. The teacher of music and arts was annoyed, as his class was the first each Tuesday morning, and each time an argument between him and Anne and her friends ensued over the hair brushing. One time, the teacher took away Anne's hairbrush, to great protest of her and her friends. She was to pick it up later at the school's reception desk, a place where pupils mostly came when they were in trouble, and where they would rather not be seen. Anne waited nervously with her best friend and was handed her hairbrush after she promised to go and see the music and arts teacher to be informed about her sanction. (Field notes, B1)

As opposed to the interventions by this Bernarduslyceum teacher, most of the brief instances of hair brushing were hardly noticed or penalised by teachers at Nexus High and Rijnsberg College. There, being occupied with one's appearance was not seen as an interruption of the teaching process or regarded as being at odds with academic achievement. When Anne was discussed in the teacher meeting at Bernarduslyceum, one of her teachers remarked, 'She is more a Havo [general higher education track] pupil: she invests more in her looks than in her homework'. Others nodded in agreement, opposing looks with academic achievement and situating Anne as out of place in the pre-university track. During the same meeting, when another girl's disappointing grades were discussed, one teacher remarked: 'She is already occupied with boys'. In the same meeting, when discussing Bas, one of the teachers urged her colleagues to help in 'protecting Bas against the girls who fancy him', as she feared he could not deal with the attention and it would keep him from paying attention in class. The advice was followed when, not much later at the beginning of a history class, teacher Emmen asked Bas to turn around in his seat: 'Bas, I

know you are a real chick magnet and all the girls want your attention, but I want to start class now'. In an interesting reversal of gendered stereotypes, female sexuality is presented here as predatory, as something that boys should be protected against.

### Discussion: heteronormative by default?

The vignettes related to friendship do not just illustrate pupils' attempts to come across convincingly as heterosexual (see for example Renold and Allan 2006), but also showed how killing time, overcoming boredom, being together, and strengthening or discontinuing friendships were produced through heterosexuality, and, at the same time, through these iterations, constituted heterosexuality as normative. It is possible to read the current analysis as evidence of the all-encompassing pervasiveness of 'the' heteronorm. However, I want to suggest it should be read as a warning against the tendency to unitise heteronormativity: as we have seen, norms of heterosexuality do not appear the same in each friendship group all the time, or in each school, and could create different effects in different situations. The vignettes support an understanding of heteronormativity as relational and situational: friendship practices such as 'watching six-packs' were a means of 'consolidating friendships rather than performing coherent identities' (Atkinson and DePalma 2009, 80). In other words, the heterosexual practice of boy-watching enabled the friendship among girls to consolidate, and in turn instituted heterosexuality as normal. In addition, friendships could be hampered by expressions of sexuality that did not fit that of the friendship group. In describing these different effects, the analysis shows the multiple effects and enactments of heteronormativity and the heterosexual matrix (Atkinson and DePalma 2009; Mak 2015).

Overall, studies of gender and sexuality in schools tend to focus on the (re)production of dominant discourses and the (un)availability of subject positions that are the consequence thereof (Dalley and Campbell 2006; Renold 2006; Ryan 2016). In this line of theorising there is a clear directionality from power to subject identity, a directionality in which there might not always be room for instability and in which relationality is seen as in service of individual identity (see also Spronk 2014). Heteronormativity is not an all-encompassing force that results in individual identity performances that either confirm or disrupt this norm (Butler 2006). Highlighting relationality, instead, makes it possible to understand heteronormativity as produced through and productive of relations such as friendship.

Teachers in the pre-vocational schools also relied on heterosexuality to establish common ground between themselves and their pupils, to hold their attention, and sometimes to make abstract knowledge relevant to pupils' lives. In both pre-vocational schools studied, sexuality was invoked by teachers, such as in the dinner conversation with Damian and by the intern Nathalie. In the pre-university school though, sexuality was seen as a threat to academic achievements. In practice this difference meant that much more talk about sexuality was allowed and invited in the pre-vocational schools, whereas it was seen as inappropriate, and therefore silenced, in the pre-university track. Understanding this divergence is important, especially in the Dutch case with its early differentiation of educational levels. The way in which sexuality was used in contrasting ways in the schools studied here exemplifies a particular way of reinforcing the mind-body distinction that is implicit in the division of educational levels (Van Daalen 2010) that are often regarded as important markers of social hierarchy and class position in

the Netherlands (Van Eijk 2011). This distinction was also evident in the amount of time that was allowed for social interactions. At Bernarduslyceum, the school was more often a pedagogic space than at Rijnsberg College or Nexus High, where the school was more often practiced as a space for the formation of social relationships and social learning, and where mundane actions like hair brushing or applying lip balm were rarely seen as disruptive.

Contrasting approaches are relatively rare in ethnographic studies of schools, although they can be considered important in breaking with the tendency to produce singular accounts of heteronormativity (or the 'school'). Studying a variety of schools alerts us to the risks of reifying not just heteronormativity but 'school' as well: each school dealt with sexuality differently, despite being situated in the same national context. The differences found might be related to the size of schools, their educational levels and subsequent differences in the understanding of the task that the school is to fulfil, or to variations in school environment and regulations (Sandfort et al. 2010). There has been very little effort to reflect upon precisely how such differences take shape and these issues warrant further study. The observations suggest that we should question the differences found without directly relating them to the educational level or class background of pupils, a move which tends to naturalise classed differences in sexuality (Bettie 2003).

## Conclusion

This paper attends to how heteronormativity is made relevant in secondary schools. Moving away from a focus on gendered and sexual identity constructions or performances, it argues that heteronormativity is drawn on in mundane practices of relating in schools.

Understanding heteronormativity's effects in and emergence through practices of forming, consolidating, or breaking friendships, and the pleasures that can be derived from friendship, indicates the pervasiveness of heteronorms in realms of social life that are often desexualised. With regard to the relations between teachers and pupils, the findings show that the constitution of heteronormativity is not universal: in two schools, heterosexuality was drawn on to ease teaching relations or establish a common ground between teachers and pupils, whereas at a third school (hetero)sexuality was seen as being at odds with academic achievements and therefore relegated to the private sphere. From this analysis it follows that challenging heteronormativity requires looking at how it produces social relations such as friendships, and how this might intersect with expectations that follow from educational level.

The current analysis complicates interventions around non-normative sexual identities. These interventions often focus on accepting or respecting differences and revolve around a moment of 'coming out of the closet'. However, 'coming out' becomes a lot harder when friendships are built around heterosexuality: it means that fears of exclusion or bullying based on sexual identity might not be one's main concern. At stake, instead, is a complication of being able to participate in friendship practices that might be harder to overcome.

Through its centrality in mundane practices of relating among friends and between pupils and teachers in schools, heterosexuality is iterated and reinstated as normative. By analysing friendship and teaching relations through the lens of heteronormativity,

this article points our attention to two directions for further inquiry. The first is the importance of understanding heteronormativity as productive of relations in schools. It is through heteronormativity that bonds are being made and that pupils learn to relate to each other. The second is the destabilising of heteronormativity: When is it presupposed, and what are its effects? These might differ from one context to another. Studying multiple contexts or cases can show the different effects of heteronormativity in different environments. Together, these observations urge us to not reify the school or the phenomenon of heteronormativity as singularly existing entities, and to be alert instead to their multiple and diverse enactments.

## Notes

1. Names for schools, pupils and teachers in this paper are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.
2. Given these arrangements, I did not need to report on the illicit drinking discussed later in this paper, since the school immediately found out what had been going on. Although I informed teachers that I was present during the incident, they decided to not ask me for more information. I did not tell the teachers that more pupils were implied than the two who were suspended. This constituted me as someone to be trusted – a friend, if you will. Since this happened at the beginning of my fieldwork with this group, rapport was quickly established. This is also the main reason that most of the vignettes on friendship draw from Rijnsberg College: here I came closest to observing the friendship dynamics.
3. The word ‘player’ is used to refer to ‘tough’ boys who have many girlfriends and who are more interested in sexual relations rather than love. For girls, the term used to refer to this is ‘slut’, a word with more negative connotations.
4. ‘Tata’ is a derogatory term derived from ‘potato’, postulated as the defining food for Dutch people, and is used in slang to indicate Dutch descent.

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