

Homosexuality at school

Since the end of 2012, primary and secondary schools in the Netherlands are obliged to teach children and young people to “treat sexual diversity with respect”. This change in the core objectives is meant to encourage tolerance towards lesbian women, homosexual men, bisexuals and transgender individuals (also referred to as LGBTs). LGBT-interest groups are pleased that schools are to take on this new responsibility. But not everyone is happy. There are at least three kinds of reservations.

1.

Orthodox reformed protestant, Jewish and Islamic schools and parents have a problem with sexual diversity for religious reasons and they hence take issue with education that promotes tolerance towards ‘deviant’ sexuality. How far may the government go in imposing such values (tolerance towards LGBTs) in public education and how far may it go in imposing the task of disseminating such values in denominational education?

And conversely: How far does the freedom of religion and the freedom of education of the members of minorities extend as to ignore, in their own circles, the values that are deemed important by the majority around them or even to shield themselves (their own circles) from such values? An underlying question is how are we to attune conflicting kinds of diversity within a pluralist democracy, religious and sexual diversity.

This is not merely a moral problem, but also a constitutional one. The obligation to teach students to treat sexual diversity with respect, may conflict with the freedom of education. The fact that there has been relatively little political or judicial resistance from Reformed protestant or Islamic schools towards the change in the core objectives, is because the government discussed the formulation of the amendments with representatives of the school councils and promised to allow schools scope to offer and embed certain things in their own way. In the light of such pragmatic solutions (actually gentlemen’s agreements) the question arises as to how democratic Dutch education policy and educational law regulations really are. And, given that the results are marked by compromise, the question arises as to the effectivity of such policy. Two years after the core objectives were changed, interest groups complain that little has been accomplished in the way of increased attention for sexual diversity in Orthodox reformed protestant and Islamic schools; in reaction, the minister promises more supervision and additional policy.

2.

Different groups in society value sexual diversity differently. Hence, whether the life styles of LGBTs are deemed acceptable and deserving of respect is a matter of controversy. For this reason, it is not self-evident, that in education children and young people should learn that such life styles are acceptable; on the contrary. In education, controversial matters should be dealt with as such, hence as controversial, meaning: as subjects on which different groups have different opinions. This is called the non-indoctrination principle. In various countries, this principle is explicitly laid down in policy or legislation, for instance in the United States, England and Germany. What does

the non-indoctrination-principle mean for the way in which schools devote attention to homosexuality, bisexuality and suchlike?

This is more complex than it may first appear. Because, it is true that philosophers of education agree that not *every* subject that is controversial has to be treated as controversial. Otherwise subjects like for instance, the moon landing, the Holocaust and the detrimental effects of smoking on health would have to be treated as controversial issues. However, they do not agree as to which criteria are relevant. In the educational-philosophical discussion about this, regarding these criteria, it is in fact the controversy surrounding the acceptability of LGBT life styles that is used as a *casus*. According to some, the non-indoctrination principle does not apply to this controversy, because the arguments *contra* acceptability are not “reasonable”. However, others believe that the arguments are reasonable or that reasonableness is not a requirement or that reasonableness should be perceived in a broader sense. How should we handle this (let us say) meta-controversiality from an educational perspective?

3.

A third reservation is of a different nature. In and around the field of education there are concerns about an overloaded curriculum. Promoting tolerance towards lesbian women, homosexual men, bisexuals and transgender individuals is perceived as yet another requirement that schools have to meet. There are complaints of it being yet another social issue that the schools are looked upon to solve. Schools have enough problems and are already under enough pressure in having to teach basic knowledge and skills.

This is not merely a practical matter, but also a moral one. Choices regarding the content of education (formation of the curriculum and the selection of subject-matter) can only be adequately justified against the background of, on the one hand, moral beliefs on people and society and, on the other hand, moral views on the function, the objective and the value of education in relation to that of other institutions, authorities and ‘parties’.