

## Sexuality in teaching – good, bad or ugly? Lessons from a collaborative ethnographic study

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### Abstract

*Sexuality in education is often considered taboo, following a social attitude that perceives sexuality as dirty and ugly in the teacher-student relationship, not only if it implicates sexual relationships but erotic feelings or subtle sexual connotations, too. Studies tend to judge the issue more reflexively along with moral and pedagogical categories of right and wrong, good and bad. However, in our collaborative (auto)ethnographic research, we found that sexuality, in a broad sense, as an anthropological dimension, is inescapably present in pedagogical relations and teaching. Going beyond a moralising approach, we aim to analyse sexuality in teaching along the lines of critical (feminist) pedagogy and the ethics of care. In line with these perspectives, we also aim to provide practical implications for teachers on the subject. Our theoretical approach follows these two frameworks but still takes a focused and limited approach to sexuality by concentrating on its universal and performative aspects. Our analysis seeks to answer how sexuality in teaching can be judged as 'good' or 'bad'. Our study's novelty consists of exploring the topic in a broad sense and a complex approach combining pedagogical and ethical aspects. Methodologically, our reflection is based on two related auto/ethnographic projects running over several years. A key element of the inquiry was a continuous collaborative reflection in our dialogical field notes complemented by interviews and focus groups. In presenting our findings, we use vignettes to illustrate the complex dimensions of sexuality in teaching. We conclude that the 'good' and 'bad' factors of the presence of sexuality cannot be separated entirely. Teachers should move beyond a moralising and dismissive attitude to reflect (or even consciously integrate) the dimension of sexuality in their teaching. Still, they should constantly reflect on the power relations and oppressive factors inherent in sexuality.*

**Keywords:** sexuality, critical pedagogy, feminist pedagogy, collaborative ethnography

### 1. Introduction

Several studies have been carried out on the subject of sexuality and schools. Most of them are concerned with sex education (e.g. Krebbekx, 2019; Kehily, 2005; Epstein et al., 2003), the topic of different sexual orientations (e.g. Pascoe, 2007, McCormack, 2012) or

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manifestations of sexuality among students or in everyday school life (Krebbekx, 2018, Rédai, 2019). However, sexuality as a dimension of teacher-student relations and teaching seems to be neglected: a taboo subject not only in schools but also in educational research. Only a few studies address this topic, and most of them regard student-teacher sexuality conceived by social norms as a scandalous phenomenon (Sikes, 2006; Johnson, 2004; McWilliam, 1996; Howell et al., 2011; Dollar et al., 2004; Ewing and Taylor, 2009; Allen, 2009; 2011; Sikes and Piper, 2009; Angelides, 2009). This is in line with the public discourses around sexuality and schooling. Sexuality often appears as something ugly in relation to education. This ugliness represents a certain disgust surrounding the issue (Haywood, 2013). It is more of an emotional attitude with a moral contour than a reflected approach. Educational literature (especially in ethnographic studies) shows that sexuality is manifested in many ways in schooling. Teachers often do not know how to deal with it, and their reactions are distance, confusion, embarrassment or joking (Rédai, 2019; Sároszpataki, 2020). Notwithstanding, practitioners and scholars rarely raise the seemingly provocative question of whether sexuality in teaching and teacher-student relationship can have a (positive or negative) pedagogical dimension.

During our ethnographic research studies (Sároszpataki 2022, Mészáros, 2022), a new interpretation of sexuality in teaching emerged. We conducted two independent, partly interconnected ethnographic/autoethnographic studies in a Hungarian high school. These research processes involved continuous conversations about our impressions, interpretations and findings. During these dialogues, we found that sexuality (which in our conception is, as we will explain below: e.g. erotic feelings and expressions, sexual topics, sexually and gender-related performances, etc.) was present in teaching practice. We both noted the lack of reflexive discourses in this field and felt the need for more complex interpretations. Thus, we decided to develop a paper that addresses this topic. We entered into this research and theory-building process with our positionalities. Barnabás Sároszpataki is a doctoral student, a heterosexual, middle-class man and a high-school teacher doing (and finishing) his doctoral study about his own teaching. György Mészáros is his supervisor, a homosexual, middle-class man, an associate professor and an activist.

As the result of our collaborative work, this paper aims to outline an approach that considers sexuality in a broad sense as an inherent part of teaching. Its purpose is to facilitate moving academic and practical interpretations of sexuality from the unreflected "ugly" to the question of "bad" or "good" by examining both the pedagogical and ethical aspects of this topic. Our further objective is to offer innovative perspectives on sexuality that help teachers prepare themselves professionally and (self-)evaluate and reflect on their work. The two intertwined ethnographies were produced in Hungary, but our insights may also be relevant to an international audience because they present a unique perspective that has not yet been elaborated in the literature.

Barnabás has already published a paper (Sároszpataki, 2020) about sexuality and teaching. In that article, he partly systematised some of the research experiences used

here. He raised and reviewed some interpretive frameworks that are neglected or even entirely new in the pedagogical literature. Some of these are also present in this article (e.g. power games, performances, the role of eros). But here, we focus on findings and conclusions related to the ethics of practice. In this paper, we have introduced new theoretical issues and new practical approaches to the pedagogical presence of sexuality, reconciling different views. In this paper, we explore the theoretical context of our results in more detail and introduce new aspects (such as the role of humour). Finally, the vignettes cited here differ in most cases from those published in the previous article.

## **2. Theoretical background: the epistemological and ontological dimensions of research**

Critical pedagogy is the most important foundation of our theoretical perspective. It aims to offer pedagogical and transformative solutions to the problem of oppression by exploring the social and systemic dimensions of education (Freire 1970/2000, McLaren, 2003). Critical pedagogy connects broader social and educational discourses on human relations (including sexuality). However, we use a limited framework of the critical perspective in this research. Primarily, we reflect on the pedagogical and ethical problem of power relations based on the ethics of care approach. Our question is how sexuality can be constructively present for those involved in education while avoiding domination and oppression (given the fact that, according to our theoretical view, it is an inevitable aspect of human being/existence). We use a feminist edition of critical pedagogy that integrates dimensions of social critique, ethics of care and feminist pedagogy (Noddings, 1984; hooks, 1994, 2003). Thus, we do not delve into the deeper, structural issues and do not aim to explore the intersectional realities of various oppressions. Aspects of class, ethnicity and sexual orientation are not included in detail in our interpretation because we have focused on a broader, anthropological understanding of sexuality and its universal dimensions. The epistemology of our research is critical because it reflects on some aspects of power relations, offers transformative solutions, and wants to influence teachers' practice. Thereby, it points indirectly towards educational and social change.

The ontological assumptions of this study are also critical in a similarly limited sense. We depart from the socio-historical reality of sexuality and examine it embedded in social and educational structures. Nonetheless, we do not use an explicit materialist perspective to interpret sexuality and gender. While we are aware of critical, materialist approaches, for practical reasons, we stick to a simpler interpretation of sexuality based more on performances. Nor do we enter into the heated debates around the interpretation of sexualities and gender (particularly the queer, social-constructivist and critical feminist traditions). The simplified definition allows focusing on shifting the discourse from the perspective of sexuality *and* teaching to the one of sexuality *in* teaching. Since, as we will explain below, our approach is that sexuality does not infiltrate, does not interfere with, nor does it supplement the teaching process but is *an inherent part of it*: an aspect of teaching that provides a new perspective on the pedagogical process.

In the course of the research, we were primarily looking for micro-histories, and teacher-student interactions, in which sexuality plays a hidden, emergent role. We also looked at happenings in which a unidirectional (or possibly bidirectional), persistent but platonic attraction shapes the teacher-student relationship. Thus, we did not focus on cases in which sexuality appears explicitly either as a subject of discourse or in the behaviour of the teacher or student. In particular, we did not consider cases in which a sexual relationship between teacher and student is realised. This means that a 'hidden' or 'broader' ontological understanding of sexuality prevails in this research.

As indicated above, we do not want to debate the more profound interpretation of sexuality. In the critical tradition, for example, the reinterpretation of Freud is strongly represented. A large amount of literature attempts to connect Marx and Freud's ideas (Wolfenstein, 1993; King, 1992). While we acknowledge that Freud's approach is an inescapable part of thinking about sexuality, we do not follow a clearly psychoanalytic framework. Sexuality as an often repressed part of everyday relations and the concept of the subconscious are present in our understanding. Still, we do not identify with the conceptual apparatus of psychoanalysis: the pleasure principle, the relationship between ego, ego and superego, the opposition of instinctual drives to social norms, etc., and we understand repression at the level of the social rather than the individual. At the same time, as indicated, we do not use an explicitly critical definition of the material-social approach to sexuality either. Notwithstanding, there is an understanding of the social embeddedness of sexuality behind our analysis.

For the ontology of sexuality, we follow Smith and Williamson's (1985) practical and simple definition. They outline what is meant by a broader meaning in three points. Sexuality is (1) not only related to the genitals but to the whole human body, (2) not a separate act(s) but a circumstance that exists continuously, (3) therefore, part of all human relationships (since the body is the primary medium of human relationships).

Our definition, therefore, already implies that sexuality is part of teaching. This approach has both benefits and risks. The risk is that our writing can be misinterpreted in two ways from an ethical point of view. One is that since sexuality is part of teaching anyway, there is no need to draw boundaries. The other, the 'counterpart' of the risk, is that because such a broad interpretation of sexuality is rare, the audience might not take on board this kind of broad interpretation and therefore understand every case we present as an unethical unleashing or at least problematic manifestation of sexuality.

However, we want to show that, although the presence of sexuality in schools is common and typical, it is not constituted by homogeneous phenomena, and there is no general perspective or attitude against which the different forms of sexuality can be approached or evaluated. The aim and advantage of our general approach is, therefore, reflective vigilance. A perspective that does not think in terms of extremes or precisely defined boundaries but rather in terms of a careful and detailed reflection on the presence of sexuality in education.

This broad interpretation can also cause difficulties in determining exactly which cases and phenomena fall within the area of sexuality. In the following paragraphs, we will try to make our concept more concrete by listing a few types of cases.

One of the most prominently reflected forms of sexuality in our research is the attraction between teacher and student (Sikes, 2006; Johnson, 2004; McWilliam, 1996; McFarland et al., 2016). These are often linked to hidden erotic thoughts and desires. Attraction is a central issue in our research, primarily because we believe that this aspect of sexuality raises essential questions that are difficult for practising teachers to deal with. However, we do not only consider attraction as a manifestation of teacher-student sexuality.

We also consider the discourses on teachers' and students' appearance, gender roles, sexuality and attractiveness (Rédai, 2019; Krebbekx, 2018) as part of the sexuality present in the teacher-student relationship (McWilliam, 1996). This is precisely a form of sexuality which, according to our definition above, is a continuous circumstance - maintaining an atmosphere of sexuality in school situations.

However, beyond these more hidden manifestations, sexuality can also appear in many ways in the teacher's and the student's behaviour towards each other. Such behaviours include, for example, courting, complimenting, and the use of flirting as a communication strategy (Trethewey, 2004; McWilliam, 1995; Johnson, 2004, Pryer, 2001). It can be any form of touching but also any behaviour that highlights gender roles and gender differences.

However, as will be explained in the article, we use sexuality in a more abstract and general sense than in the previous examples. Thus, we consider cases of sexuality any situation in which the role of the body is emphasised (e.g. performances of the teaching process, as the teacher presents the subject through his/her body (hooks, 1993; Bartlett, 1998)), or passion (e.g. passionate involvement in a classroom situation or teaching process, in the interpretation of a poem, or the enthusiastic solution of a mathematical problem (Cohler and Galatzer-Levy, 2006; Hull, 2002; Pensoneau-Conway, 2009)). We think that these situations are not only metaphorically related to phenomena of sexuality. But instead that they are closely associated with the more obvious cases mentioned above and are essentially identical in the hidden presence of sexuality.

The concept of gender is also closely linked to sexuality. We interpret it as a social system of relations, again without getting into the debate about its definition. From our standpoint, the gender perspective is most specifically relevant concerning the concept of sexuality described above. We do not aim to analyse the role of gender in teaching, but rather we consider the inevitable gendered aspects of sexuality.

The presence of sexuality, however, cannot be categorised only in ways of manifestation or behaviours. Indeed, these behaviours can have many different motivations and purposes. There may be a platonic or explicit attraction between teacher and student, but there may also be other reasons for sexualised behaviour. It may be simply a gesture to influence the mood of the teaching situation, a way of establishing a

more direct relationship. In other cases, it can be a tool of manipulation, a form of asserting one's interests or, in extreme cases, abuse of sexual desires.

It is clear that the above forms of sexuality are ethically different, but in this paper, we are trying to highlight that this distinction is typically not clear. The difficulty in distinguishing between the different types is that there are multiple purposes, effects and interpretations. Intrinsic motivations, attraction, context, behaviour and discourses simultaneously, coherently and separately maintain a hidden condition of sexuality, which is already the consequence of the fact that the actors of the teaching situation are present in their embodied reality. The root causes of the various manifestations of sexuality may be different.

In the following paper, we will highlight several, often quite distinct, manifestations of sexuality while sticking to our broad definition described above. We believe that sexuality (in teaching) cannot be represented by a list of types and that the phenomena of sexuality cannot be interpreted by typification. We can only offer different, interrelated and intertwined perspectives and approaches to interpreting the many different situations related to sexuality.

### **3. Sexuality in educational literature**

The most researched area of the relationship between sexuality and pedagogy is sex education. Even the large, synthesised works (Kehily, 2005; Epstein et al., 2003) (almost) only deal with the role of sexuality in schools in this context. Their interpretation suggests that sexuality is mainly a topic, a subject of pedagogical processes, and ignores the possibility that it might play a role as a factor in them. There are numerous studies on gender and education (Kelly, 1988; Duffy et al., 2001; Stromquist, 2007; McFarland et al., 2016). However, these works often tend to analyse the role of gender only from an educational perspective (e.g. the perception of boys' and girls' intellectual abilities) and do not focus on the more general phenomena that emerge in pedagogical interactions. Several other studies address the presence of sexuality among students (e.g. Rédai, 2019; Krebbekx, 2018) or the diversity of sexualities (e.g. McCormack, 2012). This body of research implies a more complex interpretation of sexuality, but it does not consider the potential of exploring the pedagogical role of sexuality (as some unconventional papers do (e.g. Gallop, 1992; 1995; Pryer, 2001)). The vast majority of the studies are silent about the fact that sexuality can also emerge between teacher and student. It seems a taboo subject. This is probably due to different factors like the above-mentioned component of ugliness connected to sexuality, especially concerning minors or the strong moral judgment on teacher-student sexually motivated relationships (Haywood, 2013). Some scholars (Epstein et al., 2003; Britzman, 2000) mention also that sexuality in schooling is a taboo topic because of the normative (and problematic) division between private and public. Sex is interpreted as a private matter that should not be part of public discourses and settings. There might also be a legal element in the moral considerations. The age of consent in a lot of countries is 17 years. In Hungary, it is 14; however, sexual activity

between adults and teenagers is socially less accepted (especially between teachers and students). The age of consent as a legal or a normative limit might engender the tabooization of sexuality not only concerning sexual acts but desires, erotic feelings, bodily expressions, etc., too. At this point, it is important to note that we also consider ethically highly problematic the concrete sexual activity between a teacher and a student, even if consensual sexual acts between an adult and teenager are legally not punishable in Hungary. Nevertheless, we contend that we should not make a taboo subject of sexuality in the above-delineated broader, anthropological sense, even in the case of teacher-student relations. Yet, educational research should pay more attention to this dimension in teaching.

In light of the above-described "tabooization", it is not surprising that only a few research studies address the topic of sexuality between teacher and student. There is a description of the partially asexualised teaching profession (Johnson, 2004) and discussions of the platonic or even realised reciprocal love relationships between both male (Sikes, 2006) and female (Johnson, 2004; McWilliam, 1996) teachers and their students. They examine the social perceptions of these relationships (Howell et al., 2011; Dollar et al., 2004; Ewing and Taylor, 2009; McWilliam, 1996; Allen, 2009; 2011) and discuss the incompatibility of the different social roles connected to them (Sikes, 2006, 2010; Sikes and Piper, 2009; Angelides, 2009). Much of the latter research avoids interpreting the relevant cases in-depth. While exploring critical interpretative possibilities, others focus on extreme cases, typically not reflecting on the hidden mechanisms and less explicitly sexually-related situations that can occur in any teacher-student relationship. The literature's message is that the intertwining of sexuality and pedagogy can only occur in such extreme circumstances.

Nevertheless, some studies have fundamentally different approaches (Cohler & Galatzer-Levy, 2006; Hull, 2002; McWilliam, 1995; McWilliam & Jones, 1996; Allen, 2009; Alston, 1991; Gallop, 1992; 1995; Pryer, 2001). According to these papers, sexuality and desire are always present in teaching. It is not an exceptional and particular relation(ship) between some students and some teachers but an inherent aspect of passionate teaching. Based on this, sexuality has a vital and productive force in education.

#### **4. Methodology**

The empirical data of this paper is based on the collaborative ethnographic reflections of two authors. The methodology was similar to the approach of co/autoethnography (Coia & Taylor, 2009), but it innovatively mixed ethnography and autoethnography. The doctoral student (Barnabás) pursued autoethnographic research in his own high school, where he was a teacher; meanwhile, the supervisor (György) also conducted a comparative ethnographic study observing some of Barnabás's classes. The high school is an institution in a small town in Hungary predominantly attended by middle-class students. The age of the students involved in the study was from 14 to 19. During the classes, when we were both present, we wrote two initially independent field note texts,

one from a teacher-researcher perspective and one from an external researcher perspective, and then juxtaposing them, we added responses, comments and additions to each other's notes. Thus, multi-viewpoint, dialogically organised descriptions of class happenings emerged. One of the foci of these texts was the presence of sexuality in teaching. In addition, Barnabás wrote independent field notes for five years on his own experience as a novice teacher, and György wrote a field diary for three and half years for his comparative ethnography in different school settings. Barnabás collected additional data through 10 individual interviews and 9 focus groups with students, teachers and student teachers.

During preliminary scanning of the texts, we collected more than 100 cases: stories from the interviews and vignettes or researchers' conversations on happenings in the field notes. We analysed the selected cases according to the interpretive tradition of qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; LaBoskey, 2004; Lassonde et al., 2009). We coded the cases to different themes and theoretical approaches following our main epistemological and ontological assumptions while conducting a recurrent literature search. In revisiting individual cases, we have sought a deeper analysis, richly annotated, linked and compared them along the theoretical lines. Thus, the research data, experiences, findings, ideas and lessons and the literature review interacted continuously, leading to new interpretations confirmed by empirical experience. The emic, insider perspective, which is a fruitful condition for autoethnographic and self-study research (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001), played a prominent role in our interpretation and analysis. We do not consider subjectivity an obstacle but a potential to be exploited in research. We do not aim to offer representative, generalisable results but only some deep reflections.

Both of our studies have ethical permission, and we defend the anonymity of the participants in this. We use pseudonyms and make the concrete cases unrecognisable. During the interviews, we paid particular attention to helping the participants deal with the possible uncomfortable topics.

## **5. Findings**

### ***The inevitable presence of sexuality in educational situations and relations***

As we already mentioned, the repressed nature of sexuality in pedagogical situations can be traced back to the tradition of the disjunction between the public/professional and the private/personal spheres (Britzman, 2000; Epstein, 2003). Pedagogical culture inherited this principle primarily from psychology. However, this principle is becoming highly questionable, both in general (Ford, 2011, from a feminist point of view: hooks, 1993) and in the field of psychology (Pipes et al., 2005; Taber et al., 2011; Scandell et al., 1997; Sullivan, 1993). In educational literature, there is a large body of research that not only takes for granted that the personal and professional dimensions co-construct teacher identities and roles (Bernstein-Yamashiro and Noam, 2013; Day et al., 2006; Farrell,



2014), but several authors explicitly consider it to be enriching and even transformative when the teacher engages in the pedagogical process with his or her personality, emotions, etc. (Rodgers and Scott, 2008; Shoffner, 2009; O'Connor, 2008). Now, we focus on the connection between the personal and professional. Analysing our cases and own experiences, it has become clear that separating the two spheres is not totally possible. The teacher is always present in school settings as a person. The data show that students also demand this and are more engaged in the educational (and pedagogical) process if they can see the teacher as a person. They found it inauthentic if the teacher is trying to mask or alter his or her personality in school situations.

Since sexuality is a key anthropological dimension of (teachers') personality, teachers (and the students) cannot entirely 'leave out' their sexuality (intended in the broader sense) from school settings. For example, sexual attraction or the possibility that the teacher is engaged in a (sexual) relationship (outside school) is often part of how students view their teachers and talk about them, particularly the young ones.

- Mr Teacher. How old are you, if I may ask?
- 26
- Then, you are one year younger than my boyfriend  
(FN /=field note/ 5 October 2015)

I'm entering the classroom, and I'm packing my stuff. Claudia says. "Teacher! I'm taking some photos; look how good you've gotten. I think you're very charming. (FN 10 May 2016)

Notwithstanding, sexuality is also present in students' discourses around older teachers. For example, a teacher is mainly accepted by some of the female students because he is elegant and attractive despite his age. In other cases, students highlight teachers' asexuality or sexually unattractive appearance in their discussions about them.

Teachers also appear to represent themselves as sexual beings, consciously or unconsciously. Numerous field notes show that teachers exploit their attractive appearance to motivate students, allude to their romantic relationship/marriage when they speak about themselves, and sometimes even make jokes about their own sexuality.

As one of the interviewees says:

In a classroom situation, the teacher is present with his/her whole personality, bringing in himself/herself, including his/her sexuality, even if unintentionally... because even knowledge can be attractive. The teacher shouldn't do anything against this fact, but he or she should be cautious not to push this dimension too far. (INT /=interview/ 4 December 2018)

A normative statement follows a descriptive part in this interpretation. The above-cited literature also affirms that certain boundaries remain or may be set in the pedagogical relations when the personal dimension is involved. This question of boundaries is particularly significant regarding the issue of sexuality. The discourses around sexuality always involve some ethical or normative considerations. In the following sections, we will explore not only how sexuality is represented and described

in the educational situations but also what normative or ethical judgements the participants associate with each case (i. e. good or bad).

### ***The struggle for dominance and power games***

One of the most significant dimensions of the presence of sexuality in school is connected to the issue of power. From the perspectives of feminist and critical pedagogy and the ethics of care, it is crucial to raise the issue of power and domination. It has been one of our most important interpretational points, too. Many (feminist) researchers are dismissive of the presence of sexuality in pedagogical relationships because it necessarily involves an abuse of power (Trethewey, 2004). The fact that the public sees sexual relations between teachers and students as a scandal is also partly due to this ethical consideration. This kind of moral attitude is a relevant regulating factor. The reflection on domination is pivotal to constructing a critically and ethically informed pedagogy, but this interpretation is often simplistic.

The power divide is not always in favour of the teacher. We have noticed, and it is in line with the literature, that the school environment differs from a few decades ago. The socially defined rules and roles associated with teaching have become increasingly blurred (Taylor et al., 2014; Sullivan, 1993). The teacher's position of (power) over students has also become increasingly questionable (Manke, 1997). The loosening of fixed norms and the greater acceptance of informality have given room for teacher-student interactions as power games. The complexity of the situation is that it creates a wavering 'battleground' in which both the teacher and the student may have a (powerful) interest in 'performing' their sexuality and using their sexual attractiveness (as a kind of Bourdieuan symbolic capital, cf. Bourdieu, 1998, 2002) to gain a more favourable position in classroom situations. The following case drawn from an interview is illustrative.

Certain girls in my former high school class provoked some (older, less authoritative) male teachers with their dress and comments. These teachers would often go so far as to flirt with my classmates via chat applications. They often sent small compliments, which the girls would seemingly receive readily. But in fact (usually, before the teacher(s) had arrived in the classroom) would share them with the whole class, ridiculing the teacher. (INT 12 December 2018)

This example illustrates what kind of interdependent relationships may be formed by these transgressive performances. The connections are related to social capital in terms of mutual obligations (Bourdieu, 1998). In this case (as also interpreted by the interviewee following the above extract), the schoolgirls probably gain a certain privilege in the classroom, and the teacher might gain a feeling of recognition of his sexual attractiveness. There is an abuse of teachers' power, but the girls also exercise control over the teachers and instrumentalise their sexuality. This happening and the interdependence certainly have pervasive effects on the teacher-class and teacher-students relationship and, through it, on pedagogical situations.

Furthermore, we can trace a significant tendency in the interview fragment: the interviewee's interpretation is that the girls are to blame for the teacher's behaviour. The girls provoked him, and the teacher responded. This tendency is also part of the common (patriarchal) understandings of sexuality.

The constructive pedagogical connection should be based on an ethical community where the persons respect each other and care for each other's growth. The interdependence erodes this relationship, and teaching cannot fulfil its nurturing and developing role. The ethical and pedagogical ravages of the instrumentalised sexuality and domination game are intertwined. Critical interpretation should go beyond the micro-happenings and situate this case in the context of wider socio-cultural structures. The reflection of these structures might be found in the widespread instrumental interpretation of sexuality. The power that sexuality might have in certain educational situations and for different stakeholders is surprisingly trivial for many students, and discourses on this are quite common.

Tomi <muscular, flamboyantly dressed guy> explains that if he were a teacher, he would go to class with his shirt buttoned up to his navel, "letting the nipples flash!" Then he would get everyone's attention and have no discipline problems in the classroom. (FN 26 April 2019)

In this latter example, utilising sexuality (a bodily performance with sexual connotation) is connected to the concept of disciplining or class management. The student understands it in a teacher-centred way. Discipline means that students pay attention to the teacher. In this concept, the main pedagogical tools are the ones that manage to orient the class focus on the teacher. Teachers' body and their physical attraction seem powerful means for this purpose.

In our fieldnotes, there are also several examples when students use subtle gestures of sexuality for their interests (e. g.: sending kisses and heart gestures to the teacher to gain permission). The fact that sexual attraction or flirtation is so often mentioned in students' discourse as a factor influencing the teacher is definitely linked to the process of increasing and cross-cutting commercialisation of physicality and sexuality in the broader social context.

### ***Constructing and performing gender***

In their study, Francis and Skelton (2001) present cases where male teachers construct their own masculinities in pedagogical situations (thus typically reinforcing their position of power). This phenomenon can also be observed more generally. Teachers (and students) conform to some gender roles/performances or even explicitly refer to their own gender roles/performances and the characteristics they consider important. Although this does not directly bring sexuality into the pedagogical situation, such acts are likely to emphasise the presence of sexuality because of the interconnection between gender performances and sexuality. In some cases, the emphasis on gender performance or gender roles is evidently connected to sexuality, like in the following scene from Barnabás's field notes.

Robert: Teacher, could you open my bottle, please. It's too heavy. (At first, I don't understand why he would interrupt the class with that, but in the end, I don't make a big deal out of it.)

I theatrically get ready, pulling up my shirt sleeve a little. I manage to open it. Then I kiss my bicep. Many people laugh.

Oliver [more silently and softly]: "Teacher, could you open my heart?" (FN 8 March 2019)

This "performance" represents a case where the teacher makes fun of his masculinity. He uses a gendered and sexually characterised gesture to give space for some fun during the class by answering the subtle provocation of the student. Another student reacts to the sexual connotation of the gesture and probably reveals his (same-sex) attraction toward the teacher. In our reflection, this case is a good example of the complexity of how sexuality might be constructive and problematic in teaching simultaneously. This performance might be considered a constructive, not oppressive usage of the body as a sexual and gendered 'node' of pedagogic relations. The teacher can construct a positive, not hierarchical relationship with students through such performances; meanwhile, he deconstructs the structures of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005) with a parodistic act. However, this performance might also serve as means to gain students' positive, informal attitudes toward the teacher, which is not a direct pedagogical objective. In addition, it might make students vulnerable to potentially uncomfortable feelings of attraction to a teacher. Notwithstanding, the fact that the student dared to express his feelings might be positively valued because it revealed the safe space that the teacher created.

### ***The performativity of teaching, the body as medium***

The above-depicted vignette also sheds light on another significant aspect of teaching: bodily performance. Teaching typically takes place as a series of performative events. The teacher 'acts' the lesson, (also) teaches through his/her body, uses his/her body to conduct the class, and sometimes he or she even tries to make something understood through his/her own body. Knowledge (which may be attractive to students) is always represented in an embodied way: the teacher's (or even the student's) 'body' is carrying it. We have already seen above (in expanding the notion of sexuality) that this is one of the reasons why sexuality can be seen as a constant human dimension of teaching (hooks, 1993; Bartlett, 1998). Beyond the relatively obvious cases collected in the context of physical education or drama classes, this bodily aspect can often be observed in unexpected classroom situations, such as chemistry classes. In these cases, sexuality can appear either in connection with the presentation of the subject matter (during the presentation of examples related to bodily sensations) or independently of the subject matter (due to the teacher's body movements and presentation style). These conscious or unconscious performances noted in our field notes and recorded in interviews can be interpreted as constructive ways of teaching with the body or, in other cases, as the (sexual) objectification of the body (e. g.: oversexualised movements of the teacher).

***Eros: teaching as a shared, enthusiastic activity***

There is a small number of papers on the positive, forward-looking, productive role of sexuality in pedagogical situations (Trethewey, 2004; Cohler and Galatzer-Levy, 2006; Hull, 2002; McWilliam, 1995; McWilliam and Jones, 1996; Alston, 1991; Pensoneau-Conway, 2009; Burch, 1999). Other researchers with a similar perspective go as far as to (provocatively) assert that sexuality does not merely permeate teaching but is a series of sexual acts (Gallop, 1992; 1995; Pryer, 2001). Many of these reflections use the ancient Greek concept of eros. The following example is a good illustration of these authors' approach. To add to the context, only eight girls attended this literature class because of a field trip.

[As I read Shakespeare's 75th sonnet] their attention grew from line to line so that I could experience it more. Silence for the last four lines. Ahh finally! Thanks Shakespeare! I admit I thought about looking at them to get a better involvement but then decided that would be too much. There was a touched silence, broken of course by Nelli: "It's a very beautiful poem!" "Well..." I say, "I told you so." Now let's start analysing the poem. After the form (I said sorry, but let's get the dry part over with first), we started looking at the ambivalence and imagery of the poem. Nelli immediately got into the spirit of it and began to describe the difficulties of jealousy vehemently. Blanka reacted, then Hanga, too, and the tempers were almost out of control. Blanka emphasised the importance of trust, Hanga the importance of dignity, contrasting reason with the legitimacy of jealousy. (...) It was a very good 15-20 minutes, very direct, I enjoyed it incredibly! (...) Blanka remarks at the end, "It's good that there are fewer of us. It's so familiar." I think so too. (FN 16 May 2016)

Although in the example above, the topic of the lesson is also love or a love poem, which is an important addition, more crucial is how the teacher and the students are involved in this classroom situation. This passionate, enthusiastic involvement is what we mean by the pedagogical role of eros. This implies a profound attraction, a feeling mainly according to the platonic interpretation, which can manifest itself in contemplative attention to the (inner) beauty of the other person beyond the physical and leads to the experience of erotic desire through the realisation of spiritual truth and knowledge. The eros inspires both lovers and philosophers to seek (transcendent) knowledge.

The quoted authors justify the implicit presence (and also the advancing role) of sexuality (eros) in teaching by a metaphorical interpretation. Teachers and students are present in a shared act of living cognition enthusiastically and passionately in some cases. The process of teaching and learning is like a sexual act in a metaphorical sense: giving oneself to the Other in an ecstatic way, losing and finding ourselves in an intimate, sensual process of sharing (Gallop, 1992; 1995; Pryer, 2001).

On the one hand, this highly metaphorical and romantic approach might erode the original meaning of sexuality, making it too broad and thus exposing it to blurring interpretations. This could lead to relativising the power dimensions in the presence of sexuality. On the other hand, this strong connection between sexuality and teaching might be helpful as an out-of-the-box and transgressive understanding of teaching that

has positive, pedagogical repercussions. It might facilitate a more progressive pedagogical perspective that is transformative, as hooks (1999) claims in her book: *Teaching to Transgress*. This approach represents the good side of sexuality in teaching.

### ***The role of humour***

In addition to these aspects, it should be noted that humour is present in many of the situations mentioned above. Although we have identified joking as a mechanism to avoid reflection on sexuality, it also provides an opportunity to present sexuality with less edge and less normatively in educational situations. This idea might be related to Trethewey's (2004) suggestion to consider desire as laughter, thus facilitating the reflection on it in pedagogy.

But we see the role of humour as more than just reflecting desire. In the story about opening the bottle quoted above, for example, the student's joking remark may be a humorous representation of desire, but more likely, it brings in the subject of (homo)sexuality in a joking way. We also mentioned the case of a schoolgirl who sent kisses and formed a heart with her hand to get permission to leave school during school hours. These gestures were, of course, somewhat ironic, caricatural and humorous, partly because of the situation but mainly because of the way they were performed. Although, in this case, too, the humour may mask real desires, it somewhat mitigates the fact that she uses eroticism as an instrument to legitimise behaviour that is also against the norm.

## **6. Discussion: the good and the bad kind of sexuality?**

We raised the question: is sexuality a 'good' or 'bad' dimension in teaching? From the literature, it might seem that there are these two distinct types of sexuality connected to pedagogy. One is reprehensible, oppressive, and typically detachable from the teaching process and the other is enriching and intertwined with teaching. This dichotomy does not only appear as different approaches of studies with contrasting perspectives, but also the most permissive writings that interpret sexuality in the broadest sense (e.g. Pensoneau-Conway, 2009) perpetually ask the question: is it (already) the kind of sexuality that is 'wrong' or the kind that is '(not) wrong yet'? In the autoethnographic field notes and conversational texts included in this analysis, we encountered the same problematisation several times: we often raised this question in the reflective parts of our field diaries.

Trethewey (2004) articulates a similar kind of dichotomy when she writes: "say yes and no to sex". She means that we must admit that sexuality can be understood as both an oppressive and a liberating act (for the participants). To say no and yes means to keep this duality in mind, to look for a practice in which "pedagogical sexuality" can be experienced, but to avoid its risks and dangers. In the end, Trethewey is also separating 'good' and 'bad' sexuality, even if they are the same sexuality, but can be two kinds in their effects and functioning. But we think that this reflection is not sufficient. We argue

that the partly inevitable, partly voluntary presence of sexuality in the pedagogical space has good and bad dimensions simultaneously.

From a philosophical point of view, in every human relationship, the parties have goals and desires that cannot be the same, so they exercise a certain amount of power over each other. Supposing sexuality is taken into account as a factor, this is even more obviously true since, in sexuality, the other person appears as the subject/object of our own goals and desires. With constant negotiation and work, the power divisions in intimate, personal relationships can be reduced or minimised, but the pedagogical relationship always bears the burden of unequal power.

To take an example of a case that has been brought up in the concept of eros: it is true that regarding learning as an enthusiastically shared experience, sexuality is more liberating than oppressive. But let us note that the teacher uses eros to manipulate the students' learning to some extent. The students' enthusiasm also influences or even manipulates the teacher's behaviour (to the students' advantage in most cases).

We think it is an illusion to separate good and bad sexuality in teaching totally. We cannot typify forms or behaviours of sexuality (always in our broader sense and not considering the extreme cases and clearly abusive forms) that are yet good because they are inside certain boundaries. This means that teachers should perpetually be in doubt. This is the 'wobbling', to which we referred above about our reflections also described in Pensoneau-Conway's (2009) autoethnography. This reflection, in our view, has no resting point because the care for others always interpellates us ethically. From a critical perspective, pedagogical relationships and the inevitable sexuality in teaching always have a power dimension, and thus, the latter always remains a potentially oppressive force.

However, this does not mean that it should be rejected and excluded from pedagogy. It is not possible, either. In addition, when making pedagogical decisions, we must always bear in mind that it is not possible to exploit only the positive (or only the negative) effects of sexuality. There will always be its shadow side. This claim does not mean that we should not have clear boundaries around the presence of sexuality in teaching. In the final section, we will outline a practical, reflective process for teachers about these boundaries.

### **Conclusions: the steps of (self-)reflection and decision-making for teachers**

Our goal has been to offer some practical pedagogical and ethical advice drawn from our analysis. It is obvious that no simple "recipe" can be given for such a complex issue, but we outline a possible trajectory of reflection that can be unfolded based on what has been described so far. First, teachers need to recognise that sexuality is present ab ovo in pedagogical situations. Suppose they avoid the traditional moralising attitude and the triangle of denying, disapproving and making fun of it. In that case, they can then come closer to the phenomenon, freeing themselves from guilt, shame and confusion. In this

case, they can also see sexuality as having aspects in pedagogy, such as the role of eros, which can be fertilising and fruitful in teaching.

Whoever gets here has taken critical steps towards a liberated and authentic pedagogical practice. It is liberating for the teacher, who is thus freed from the narrow borders of taboo. But it is also liberating for the students, who are also able to experience and make sense of broader ideas and feelings about sexuality. (In their case, this is particularly important because they are at the beginning of their sexual experiences.) As one student-teacher commented after one of the focus group interviews: "It's a pity we didn't have training on this topic at school. It would have put a lot of things in place for us."

At the same time, who finds the "good sexuality", he or she has also put him/herself (and his/her students) at great risk because he/she might not consider its possible downsides. To become a critical and ethically conscious teacher, we think the following reflective steps are crucial. Thus, teachers should recognise and accept that the presence of sexuality inevitably contains (unequal) power dimensions that are potentially exploitative and oppressive; at the same time, they should realise that this does not mean that it is necessarily wrong overall.

However, after embracing these thoughts, teachers will need further reflection on boundaries and ethical and pedagogical criteria. They should ask the most important ethical questions: Does one party suffer any disadvantage? Does one party exercise power over the other? How? Is there a pedagogical advantage of the presence of sexuality? Which do I feel is more important, the pedagogical or the personal goal related to sexuality (in a broad sense: feeling good, desire, etc.)?

There are no clear answers to these questions, not even because, in our view, there are no right and wrong types of sexuality in the broad sense. Even if we can distinguish between different aspects and manifestations of sexuality (as we have done in this article), an ethical judgement does not follow clearly from these. Approaching sexuality in different ways helps us to make more complex interpretations of pedagogical situations. It opens a wide space for ongoing reflection, allowing us to make ethical decisions.

The task of practitioners is to recognise and accept the positive impact of sexuality while minimising the risks associated with its dark side (which is not a specific, clear "side"). Reflective pedagogical practice takes place in a dialectical relationship between the interpretative and ethical possibilities of sexuality, which is perhaps best achieved by always keeping the pedagogical goals in mind, and leaving the personal sides (the desire, the sexuality) as a background embedded in but not above it.

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