

On the Ground in the Netherlands: Classroom practice in sex education

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ABSTRACT

Every teacher knows that things usually don't go according to plan. Even the most thoughtful curriculum must include room for flexibility as implementation is influenced by factors such as student questions, scheduling, and interruptions. While my readings in the literature on comprehensive sexuality education in the Netherlands described the curricular goals, standards, and topics, visiting classrooms in action provides context and nuance, as well as the immediacy of working with students. I visited several science classes during sex ed units and observed teacher approaches, student engagement, and the academic environment. These reflections accompany an evaluation of the Dutch approach to sexuality education and ways it could enhance sex ed in other communities.

Biology Class, Level 3

Cartesuis Lyceum visit, 5 Feb 2018 . Hosted by Gee van Duin, a seasoned biology teacher and proponent of comprehensive sexuality education in the Netherlands. The population includes students of Dutch heritage and those with migration backgrounds, ages 12-18, who pursue two or three different courses of study according to Dutch educational practice. All take general biology courses and some continue that study.

Instead of a separate health class that includes sex ed, the Dutch national education goals consider reproduction and sexuality part of the standard biology curriculum. As each school is autonomous, teachers select or design the course materials as they see fit; Silke, a Cartesius biology teacher, incorporates elements of the popular Long Live Love program and other resources into her own curriculum to meet the needs of her students.

On the day of my visit to a Level 3 biology class, the 24 students shook hands with the teacher as they entered and found their seats with friends of the same gender. According to the teacher, about half were “from Amsterdam” and half had “migration backgrounds.” Three of the girls wore hijabs with their jeans, suggesting conservative family values at home. This was the setting for an introductory video clip on consent, then small group discussions prompted by a set of cards with various scenarios. The teacher also introduced the “Love Box”— and invited students to write anonymous questions throughout the period and place them in the box to be answered later.

The video, *Consent, Simple Like Tea*, uses a running metaphor to normalize the idea of sexual consent as akin to the general consideration we all expect of each other, rather than a

special rule for sex. The students seemed familiar with the concept, so the teacher moved on to explain the next activity. I helped distribute cards and joined a cluster of girls to look through the cards. They took turns reading out a scenario, then answering for themselves, with the others either agreeing or adding a different perspective. Questions included subjects like consent, STDs, relationships, safe sex, condoms, LGBTQ+ issues. The girls, two with covered heads, answered readily, translating from Dutch to English for me, and explaining their thinking when they wanted to. Of all the dozen or more questions we reviewed together, the most provocative asked “Is it okay to date someone of a different race or ethnic group from you?” And “What if your parents wanted you to break up with someone?” — questions that have particular cultural resonance in Amsterdam and at Cartesius Lyceum. While other questions were more directly about sex, the students answered them matter-of-factly and moved on, not finding them worth discussion.

I raised this observation afterwards — noting that the girls from conservative Muslim families were unabashed and knowledgeable about sexual information, yet committed to marriage before sex and respecting their values of their families. Silke explained that Muslim families in the school want the girls, and boys, to have the information they learn in school, but to make their decisions based on their family values.

Every year, the Cartesius teachers include a lesson on how to use a condom. Each student has the opportunity to practice on a model penis, with guidance from the teacher as needed to make sure the condom is used properly, and even gets a condom to take with them. They were incredulous that my state, North Carolina, has legislation prohibiting the distribution of condoms at schools, and appalled that students were not taught how to use a condom. They

asked “How else would they know how to do it properly when the time comes?” That boys and girls were familiar with condom use was a normal expectation for the classroom and a public health responsibility.

I interviewed the principal about the school culture and the administrative perspective on sex ed, and asked what kind of feedback she got from parents about the sex ed curriculum. No parent had ever contacted her about it. She expressed that if a parent had brought such a concern, that she would consider it the prerogative of the teacher as an education professional to determine course content, as in any subject. She found it improbable that a parent would bring a concern to her, as the parents value the education their children receive and want them to be informed; she found it unusual that I might think she had any involvement in the biology curriculum, as that is the purview of teachers.

An interesting contrast to my world, where any given week I will learn of a school that has come under fire, and decided (or been forced) to scale back the scope of sex ed topics due to parent concern.

Questions from the Love Box

Are there more than two genders?

What is the average breast size?

Do women have to come to get pregnant?

Do you get your period while pregnant?

Is it bad if the man has an orgasm and the woman does not?

The questions are real! The answers respect that. The teacher responded with biological information when called for, looked up facts online, and talked about respect, caring, and communication. Questions answered, class ended. The Love Box will stay in the classroom for new questions next time.

Different classroom, same idea.

Visit to Scholengemeenschap/Exellius, Reigerbos, hosted by Victorine van Pelt, 15 Feb 2018. Victorine invited us to her Level 2 science class as they wrapped up their unit on reproductive biology. The students were versed in the hormonal landscape of puberty, fertility, menstruation, and sexual function by the day we arrived for the lesson titled *The Chemistry of Love*.

The teacher drew from their knowledge about how hormones make you feel and how this connects to sex, and the class nodded along, already informed. A reflective writing exercise triggered the deeper discussion. Prompted with a set of questions on “tenderness” students recalled and described experiences when they felt whole, complete, comfortable, and good; several shared their thoughts with the class and the teacher casually integrated those good feelings with the context for sexual relations with someone you love.

This approach did not depart from the biology, but was explicitly connected and continued to intertwine throughout the subjects of menstruation, virginity, intercourse, pregnancy, sexual diversity, contraception, disease prevention, love, and the dangers of pornography—the discussion guided by questions and comments from the students themselves. Rather than being unaware of these topics, students had questions and partial understandings from their daily exposure to social interactions, social media, and entertainment, and they welcomed the chance for clarity.

Victorine, a seasoned classroom teacher and compassionate educator, responded in frank and informational terms that defused embarrassment, reassured students, and encouraged thoughtful consideration of self and others. Her matter-of-fact responses and respect for her students generated eager conversation among the class, and a visible sense of understanding and even relief in the students. The condom demonstration, using a broomstick, was a highlight, with the practical Ms. van Pelt pointing out a few key points: why to use a condom, unrolling it properly, disposal, and talking about condom use with a partner.

SGR/Exellius offers several educational routes, and these students may or may not receive further sex ed in school, depending on which path they choose. In another year, many of them will move into vocational programs and they may finish school at sixteen. Victorine explains that it's important that they have at least this much credible information at this stage in their development. The Ministry of Education and the Municipal Health Services agree.

Teaching Teachers

Classroom observation, 20 Feb 2018; biology teacher education program at University of Amsterdam. Hosted by Lutz Lohse and sponsored by Gee van Duin.

The homework, that the six students in the biology teacher education program read for class, was to review the 2017 report on youth sexuality in the Netherlands, *Sex Under 25*, and come in with observations. The students were impressed by the same points I was—that the median age of first sexual intercourse rose to over 18, and that social media plays a significant part in adolescent lives, including access to and evaluation of sexuality information.

The “positive outcomes” of comprehensive sex education are compelling: informed consent, decreased assault and harassment, delayed initiation of sexual interaction, increased

use of condoms and contraception, development of communication skills, decreased pregnancy, STIs, and abortion. Biology teachers in the Netherlands expect to field questions and facilitate discussions about these aspects of sexuality education as well as the nuts and bolts of reproduction.

Professor Lohse opened the red plastic case that every Dutch biology classroom has, with its complete selection of contraceptives. First he passed out styrofoam model penises and condoms to every two students to demonstrate how a teacher might facilitate this in the classroom. The adult students laughed a bit, and lacked the enthusiasm of the younger students we saw at SGR. For those Level 2 students it was new, hands on material--and the kind of lesson that will stick. The adults seemed adept at the task. Lutz exhibited an IUD and modeled insertion, and pointed out the other devices and pill packets. The presentation is informational: this is what each item is, this is how it works.

The Long Live Love Award goes to...

The Bernard Lievegoed School, Maastricht, NL. A Montessori secondary context.

As is customary, sexuality education is embedded with the science curriculum at the Bernard Lievegoed School. This school has over 800 secondary students in a rehabilitated industrial building that offers open spaces, modern design aesthetics, and a contemporary vibe. It was selected by jury in February for the Love Award from SOA/AIDS Netherlands, developers of LLL, for excellence in education about relationships and sexuality. A Gay-Straight Alliance, Student Council support, and administrative commitment to student development are highlighted as exemplary components of their success.

My colleague Amber Moore and I met with two science teachers, Sjors van den Dries and Hermine Degenaar, who described the school's holistic approach to student development. This underlies all instruction, and is structurally supported by the mentorship program that matches students with teachers for weekly non-academic programming. Unlike in many Dutch schools, tracking is delayed until Level 4, and for the first three years, cohorts of students stay with the same mentor. The system promotes community bonding and relationships, and also provides space to cultivate interpersonal respect and understanding. The science teachers provide a broad education in reproductive and sexual biology to all students, which is extended in mentor groups and includes gender identity, sexuality, relationships, and personal development.

According to the teachers, key elements in the strength of their program include "open dialogue" between the school, students, and parents, and the school culture of openness, personal responsibility, and connection. Parents receive an information packet that explains the curriculum, values, and mission of the school so they are fully informed and included as partners. Mentors make home visits annually and establish personal relationships with students and their families. Bernard Lievegoed is a "free" school, so parents have discretion in selecting it and are charged no tuition. Its popularity and success are evident in full enrollment and high demand for spaces. Students who enter the school at age twelve typically stay through graduation.

In this school, sexuality education is not just about sex. It's integrated into the work of "becoming a person" that students engage in, a part of their whole education. The teachers we talked to take it as given that teaching about issues like relationships, responding to social

pressures, and forming an identity—which may intersect, or not, with sexuality—is central to their educational goals.