Challenging established education

Student perceptions of anti-oppressive components in the Dutch high school context

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Date: August 11, 2021

Number of words: 17,968

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I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom.

- bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*

Acknowledgements

The thesis writing process has been a bumpy ride. Thank you to my supervisor dr. Christine Quinan for your interest and attention for my writing and research ambitions. Your suggestions and feedback proved to be lifesavers each and every time. I am so happy that you did not leave Utrecht University before coaching me.

Thanks as well to the rest of the Gender Studies staff and students at Utrecht University for the inspirational classes and conversations. I am grateful to have met you and glad that we managed to become close and support each other despite the pandemic. The master's programme has been a motivation to remain passionate while moving forward on our quest for social justice.

Thank you to my co-researchers Donna, Yrsa, Otis, Samuel and Jesse. I am grateful for your time and thoughtful suggestions. Thank you for the trust and for sharing your experiences with me. And thank you to my friend Nanoah for deploying your social media platform and helping me find the participants. You are one to look up to, not just for the work you do but most importantly for the person you are.

Thank you to my dear friends (0570 and beyond) and family for the unconditional love and support throughout my academic journey. I would have never been able to do what I did without you next to me. Thank you to my parents (all four of you!), grandma and grandpa, for being my safety net and my best friends. You enable me. I am so very grateful for you. Special thanks to my baby cousins Kick and Tony. You are the sunshine in my life and motivate me to keep going. Gender Studies is my way of protecting your happiness and one day I will explain to you why.

Thank you to the love of my life, Amee, for loving and comforting me every day and taking the edge off all my hardships. I love you more than I can put into words and I am so proud of you. There is no universe like you. It's you and me, forever.

Finally, thank you to my cat Lucy for meowing at me every day and attacking my arm while I was writing the thesis. I cannot sleep without you. You are the best roommate.

Abstract

For a long time now, there has been a worry about youth's lack of political participation. Arguably, this has to do with a general emphasis within education on the banking system of education and little attention for the social sciences (in The Netherlands: Maatschappijleer class). I argue that we need empathy to increase the degree of political participation. To teach empathy, we need anti-oppressive education. This thesis explores the perceptions of five former high school students on the presence of anti-oppressive components, such as antiracism, in the high school curriculum and the school environment. Furthermore, it will address the students' opinions on the value, challenges and requirements of an elaborate implementation of anti-oppressive education in the Dutch high school context. Through critically approaching the students' thoughts and opinions from a feminist point of view, the article argues that anti-oppressive components are currently lacking in the Dutch high school system and would, indeed, be a valuable addition in aiming for a more inclusive society in which our students learn early on to take a stand against injustice.

Contents

Introduction

As a Gender Studies scholar, I try to think about ways to fight inequality, and I have always been convinced that the most critical area to do this is the educational realm. Education's worth is nearly self-evident. Education guides new generations on the way to maturity. It provides the knowledge and skills to grow and contribute to society in a personally fitting way. School is also the place where children learn to live in a diverse society. The place where they first mingle with all kinds of people. The place where they spend a considerable amount of time during critical years of their development. School has a significant influence on what kind of adults our children become.

I argue that schools in the Netherlands (arguably worldwide) lack in providing education outside of the banking system of education. This system is based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represented gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored, and used later (hooks 1994, 5). The banking system turns students into passive consumers instead of active participants. Together with generally very little attention to societal education (Maatschappijleer/Dutch social sciences is a mandatory class, but only lasts for about a year or just one semester), I worry about students' lack of political participation, which I think has to do with a lack of engaged pedagogy, a lack of room for emotions at school and a lack of empathy for people who are marginalized. Worldwide, there are concerns about youth's lack of interest and involvement in politics, which contributes to a democratic deficit (Lopes et al. 2009, 2). There are many possible ways to increase participation, but nearly all of these attempts start with education. Research shows that civic education matters, even though "this force of socialisation competes with other forces at play in society", such as communities in children's surroundings. Not all evidence from research results from research on civic education is directly positive. However, it appears that the influence of citizenship education operates above and beyond background factors like socioeconomic status and race, meaning that civic education can make a difference despite other formative factors (Lopes et al. 2009, 3).

Positive change in the world is the duty of any researcher. Coming from a philosophical educational background, I firmly believe that (personal) happiness is the ultimate goal in life and that research should eventually, albeit indirectly, contribute to considering what happiness is and how it can be achieved. Moreover, as someone who has struggled with depression all her life, the desire to pursue happiness and transmit this into my work as a researcher is emphasized even more. This motivates me to investigate ways to

improve education and aim for a society characterised by inclusion. The research question for this thesis is as follows: How do Dutch post-high school students (older VWO students, aged 17-20) perceive the current presence of anti-oppressive components at school and the value of adding anti-oppressive education to the curriculum or in the school environment? Answering this question will help improve the educational system to be a better fit for a diverse range of students and contribute to students' increased awareness and empathy for people and the world. By focusing on education, we can start to fight the democratic deficit.

After this introduction comes Chapter 1, the theoretical chapter, in which I will elaborate on what anti-oppressive education, as outlined by Kevin Kumashiro (2000), is and how it connects to empathy and political participation in students. This theory is the foundation for the practical side of the research that I will explain in Chapter 2, the methodology chapter. Chapters 3 and 4 offer a discussion and analysis of my findings. Chapter 3 goes into the extent to which the Dutch high school students I interviewed perceive anti-oppressive education, queer pedagogy or critical pedagogy in the curriculum or the school environment. Chapter 4 goes into the students' opinions on implementing anti-oppressive education more elaborately, as well as suggestions for the implementation of anti-oppressive education and the further research that is needed. The thesis ends with concluding remarks.

Chapter 1: Anti-oppressive education, empathy and political engagement

Defining anti-oppressive education

Anti-oppressive education, critical pedagogy, engaged pedagogy, queer pedagogy, and anti-bias education are all ways of teaching and shaping a curriculum that aim to work against various forms of oppression and achieve liberty and equality (Kumashiro 2000; 2002; Brown 2013; hooks 1994; Freire 1973). In order to further explain anti-oppressive education, I will primarily focus on the writings of Kevin Kumashiro, who has written extensively about this topic and incorporates feminist and poststructuralist approach in his work. Kumashiro (2000) distinguishes four main approaches to anti-oppressive education that I will elaborate on below. He argues that beneficial anti-oppressive education should use all four approaches and constantly look beyond the field of educational research to incorporate theories and ideas that remain marginalized (2000, 25).

Oppression is a dynamic in which specific ways of being are privileged while others are marginalized (Kumashiro 2000, 25). This definition is something theorists generally agree on. It turns out to be harder to agree on the *causes* of oppression and what is needed to change, which is where the four different approaches come in. The approaches agree that education is the start to a brighter future: here, we start training critical thinkers.

Kumashiro's four approaches are relevant to the Dutch high school context because they help to see clearly where anti-oppressive education is currently lacking and what it would bring if it were more elaborately implemented. My goal with this research is to substantiate the claim that the Dutch high school system is currently lacking in the implementation of anti-oppressive education. To understand why this is a problem, I will be outlining what anti-oppressive education is, mainly through Kumashiro's four approaches, and show how it connects to fuelling empathy in students and, with that, a higher degree of (intended) political participation. Following Kumashiro, I believe that anti-oppressive education must always incorporate (parts of) all four approaches because each approach has a different emphasis that is not elaborately included in the other approaches. This is why I argue that a definition of anti-oppressive education must include all four approaches. Before I dive deeper into the approaches, I want to elaborate on my use of language surrounding the practice of othering. "The Other" usually refers to groups of people traditionally marginalized in society: they are other than the (Western) norm, such as people of colour or queer people. The Other is identified in their differences from the Self: othering means labelling someone as belonging

to the socially subordinate category of the Other. Othering often occurs when someone is perceived not to fit the norm of the social group, which is a form of the Self. Because othering is a reductive practice supported by language that runs the risk of merely solidifying the dominant position, I needed to remain alert to my usage of the term "the Other". Therefore, I decided to use more general words, e.g., "students who are othered" and "people who are othered". With these words, I am referring to (groups of) people who are often seen as the Other by those who fit into the standard. Whenever I mention "the Other" as such, I am following Kumashiro in the names he chose for his approaches.

      Education for the Other focuses on improving the experience of students who are othered. Through this lens, schools can be seen as harmful spaces where the person who is othered can be poorly treated (think discrimination, harassment, bullying, violence, exclusion). Instead of the harm coming from actions, it can also come from *inaction*, for example, if certain students receive less attention than other students. Oppression, though, is not always as visible and can also result from specific ideas or assumptions (stereotypes, bias, prejudice) about the person who is othered that influence how the person who is othered is treated (Kumashiro 2000, 26-27). In order to empower the position of these people, researchers have suggested that schools need to be (or provide) helpful spaces for all students, especially those who experience oppression. The school needs to be a space where normalcy is not assumed, and otherness is embraced, but also provide spaces such as therapeutic spaces where students can work through trauma (Kumashiro 2000, 28). Secondly, educators need to teach *all* students, meaning that diversity among students needs to be acknowledged and embraced. Education needs to be sensitive to differences. For example, a teacher should not assume that all students are heterosexual and leave their sexuality outside of school, but instead acknowledge that students will bring their sexuality to school and that there is diversity among their sexualities (Kumashiro 2000, 28-29). In this thesis, however, I will not be primarily concerned with sexuality but also focus on other forms of difference.

This approach is powerful because it calls on recognizing diversity, but it also has its limitations. Focusing merely on the treatment of the person who is othered is not sufficient. By focusing on the marginalization of the person who is othered, the approach can be said to imply that the person who is othered is the problem. Secondly, a form of education that is "for" the person who is othered requires defining groups with fluid and shifting identities. Who, for example, would the helpful spaces in the school be for? Even when a group is

clearly defined, it may fall short for marginalized students based on more than one identity (intersectionality). Kumashiro (2000) argues that educators need to look at what is needed right now and continually keep re-creating the safe spaces and ways to tackle oppression to catch those falling into the margins.

Education about the Other has as its primary focus to address what all students need to know about the person who is othered to fight oppression – instead of just focusing on how the person who is othered is treated. This focus marks a turn from focusing on the school environment to focusing on the school curriculum. Researchers suggest that knowledge about people who are othered is often incomplete due to exclusion, invisibility and silence, or distorted through disparagement, denigration and marginalization (Kumashiro 2000, 31-32). There seem to be two kinds of knowledge that are potentially harmful to people who are othered. The first kind is what society deems normal and what is normative. Otherness, here, is known only as contrasting to the norm, and therefore only partial knowledge. Partial knowledge can lead to misconceptions. In the formation of the school curriculum, schools can contribute to this partial knowledge.[1] For example, when a minority is highlighted only as deviant from a norm in subject matter at school, students do not learn to look beyond this general idea about a minority and learn that the only way in which they need to know about this group of people is in how they differ. This could lead to prejudice and judging people based on one aspect of their identity.

The second type of knowledge about people who are othered that can be harmful is the knowledge based on stereotypes: this is also partial knowledge. Even more so, it is biased because stereotyping reduces people to a few superficial, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by nature (Hall 1997). Even though students often learn these things outside of school, schools do little to debunk these stereotypes. For example, there are nearly no portrayals of queer people in health textbooks, except in the context of STDs (Whatley 1992). In social textbooks, queer people are usually only portrayed regarding the harassment they suffer. What this does is that it reduces queer people to the characteristics of often having STDs (with which come the negative connotations of promiscuous, unhealthy and foul) and of being outcasts, i.e., people one must pity. While stereotypes are not always wholly ill-founded, the reduction of people is what is especially problematic. These knowledges are often taught unconsciously or through the hidden curriculum (Kumashiro

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[1] Partial knowledge is not undesirable per se. It is still knowledge. We just need to be extra aware that partial knowledge is never all there is.

2000, 32).

In order to stop reinforcing these ideas in school, researchers suggest that specific units about the people who are othered need to be included in the curriculum, such as feminist scholarship. A second strategy is to integrate Otherness throughout the curriculum, e.g., by talking about the gay resistance movements when discussing the civil rights movements of the sixties or in the wording of math problems. This strategy contrasts with addressing topics like these in a one-day session, which is suggesting that groups are mutually exclusive and can be reduced easily (Kumashiro 2000, 33).

The apparent strength of this approach is that it calls upon educators to increase visibility. Secondly, this approach reaches all students, normalizes differences and increases empathy for the person who is othered. Dangers of this approach could be presenting a dominant narrative, e.g., "*the* queer experience," and positioning the person who is othered as the expert, for example, when a student is asked to explain a particular minority perspective. It also should not be overdone with the goal of having full knowledge, which is impossible (Haraway 2002), especially regarding time limits such as the length of the average school day (Kumashiro 2000, 33-34).

Heringer (2020), who critically revisits Kumashiro's approaches, argues that the limitations to this approach are connected and come from the same issue: a hierarchical axiology in which the origin is pure, simple, standard, self-sufficient, normal and self-identical, in order to think then in terms of derivation, complication and accident. This approach, then, suggests the self's ego boundaries are flexible enough to incorporate another into its reality without projecting anything upon the other. Heringer sees this as eliminating differences and unifying identities, with a desire for whiteness behind it (2020, 57).

Moreover, ignorance about people who are othered is not the problem (although it is arguably a cause of oppression): changing oppression also requires *disruptive* knowledge. Students need to learn that what is being taught can never tell the whole story. However, even if students grow to be more empathetic, this empathy can still be reinforcing the us-them binary. Feelings of empathy often come from learning to see oneself in the other: "they" are like "us". This is a thinking process that allows the self to remain privileged. Education about the Other does not necessarily require students to reflect upon themselves: the self goes uninspected. Kumashiro, therefore, argues that empathy, even though necessary and valuable, cannot be a panacea (2000, 35).

Education that is Critical of Privileging and Othering (or critical pedagogy) emphasizes that besides looking at and learning about oppression, educators and students also

need to look at and learn about groups that are normalized and access privileges. Stronger still, we need to focus on how this dual process is upheld through social structures and competing ideologies. This includes reflecting on how schools are a part of these structures and ideologies. Researchers have argued that schools maintain hegemony and serve two functions in that regard: to privilege particular identities and marginalize others, and legitimizing this by couching it in the language of normalcy. In working against oppression, schools have to look at their complicity (Kumashiro 2000, 35-36).

In order to critique and transform hegemonic structures and ideologies, this approach calls for starting with gaining more knowledge about oppression (not just about people who are othered, but also about how society upholds certain constructed norms). Moreover, besides learning, it involves *unlearning.* Unlearning can mean learning how to stop doing something one is very used to doing. One can unlearn that "fat" is a negative word by reminding oneself every time it comes up that it is not a negative word. Unlearning, however, also includes thinking about what it means to *learn* (how did you learn that "fat" is a negative word?) and how you became so used to this way of learning that you failed to question it (Dunne & Seery 2020, 15). Privileges are often (made) invisible, so unlearning is needed to disrupt and uncover these ideas. Students, then, also need to learn about themselves and about their way of learning. Kumashiro argues that teachers need to engage in a pedagogy of positionality, focusing on learning about how one is positioned in society and how one positions others. Besides knowledge, critical thinking skills are required, according to this approach, in order to empower students to challenge oppression (Kumashiro 2000, 37).

The strength of this approach is the extra dimension of trying to change society instead of only gaining knowledge about it. Students are required to reflect upon themselves as well. This approach should not only lead to empathy for others but also resistance to injustices worldwide.

A weakness could be that teaching about oppression as something structural implies that it has the same effect on people. Structural explanations, then, do not account well for diversity and particularity. Situatedness thus needs to be stressed more. Also, the goals of changing society and resistance presume that gaining knowledge and critical thinking would lead to personal action and transformation. However, what if a student who gained the necessary knowledge keeps acting in the same way? It seems that the causal link between knowing and acting is not immediately apparent. I will come back to this issue later.

As a teacher, it is hard to know what a student learned and how this new knowledge will move them. This could lead teachers to feel paralyzed. A teacher, after all, wants to stay in

control, which is difficult if they do not know for sure what their students are learning. Moreover, teacher education often focuses heavily on lesson plans and preparation, while anti-oppressive education can move us to unknown directions that we cannot prepare for. Handling the sense of unknowability that comes with anti-oppressive education, as a student and a teacher, requires perseverance and constantly keeping the goal in mind. This brings us back to *looking beyond*: we need to rethink teaching and move away from essentializing it. Rather than aiming for a specific understanding, we need to use anti-oppressive education to aim for movement (Kumashiro 2000, 38-39).

Education that Changes Students and Society turns to poststructuralism and argues that oppression comes from discourse, specifically the *citing* of particular oppressive discourses such as white supremacy. Oppression, then, is the repetition of harmful histories. Instead of merely dismantling stereotypes aiming for resistance, this poststructuralist approach argues that what is harmful are the citational practices. Citationality thus helps us understand the cause of harm, but it is also helpful in understanding how oppression (as discursively produced) can play out differently in different situations. Different forms of oppression can supplement each other, but oppression is also always situational and intersectional (Kumashiro 2000, 40-41).

This approach emphasizes that the ways we think are not just influenced by what is said but also by what is not said. This is what is sometimes called the hidden curriculum: things students learn because they are not said or because they are implicit. From this approach, it is also argued that change requires becoming involved in altering citational practices. Awareness and resistance are not enough: we need to rework history actively. When enough people do this kind of labour, citational practices can change (think about the reclaiming of the word "queer") (Kumashiro 2000, 42).[2]

Kumashiro argues that contemporary feminist and queer readings of psychoanalysis offer helpful insights to anti-oppressive education. He mentions four of those insights. First: the unconscious desire for repetition and the psychic resistance to change are barriers to anti-oppressive education. Anti-oppressive education needs to address not just a lack of knowledge but also a *resistance* to knowledge. Kumashiro explains that we unconsciously

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[2] "Queer" was used to refer to something strange, odd or peculiar (Oxford English Dictionary, 2021). It came to be used pejoratively against members of the LGBTQ+ community. In the late 1980s, a movement arose to reclaim the word by turning it into a neutral or a positive identifier for LGBTQ+ people. This does not mean that we lose track of the word's original meaning and how queer people were harassed, called names, and cursed at. However, it does mean that a growing group of people actively start using a term to regenerate its meaning and turn it into something positive.

desire to learn only what affirms what we know and our sense of self (2000, 43). Anti-oppressive education, then, must necessarily involve being unsatisfied with what is being learned. This can be hard for teachers, who are then unable to rely upon a lesson plan. Teaching can no longer be about repetition and affirmation but must involve uncertainty, difference and change.

Secondly: anti-oppressive education involves crises. Kumashiro argues that learning about oppression and unlearning certain things can be upsetting and paralyzing, leading to a paradoxical condition of learning and unlearning. Therefore, a space in the curriculum needs to be created for students to work through crises. A crisis is what leads to learning because it is the process that moves a student. Thirdly, anti-oppressive education involves self-reflexivity. Learning about people who are othered (with the goal of empathy) is not enough because it comes down to seeing how they are like us, which maintains the centrality and normalcy of the self. Schools need to help to queer our understandings of ourselves. This means separating the normal from the self and showing students that nobody really *is* normal, but that "normal" is no more than a socially constructed concept. This includes deconstructing the Self/Other binary (Kumashiro 2000, 44-45).

Finally: teaching involves unknowability. We do not want to push students to think in a certain way, but we want to have them think *differently* and *informed*. Once again, Kumashiro clarifies that anti-oppressive education is not necessarily about advocating certain strategies or aiming for specific effects because we cannot know what students will pick up on exactly. Learning involves multiple ways of reading. Kumashiro (2000) argues that we are not trying to move to a better place, but we are trying to move. Moving here means to keep working on doing better. It means being open to learning new things and having your mind changed. It means that we need to work against the repetition of sameness specifically. We do not want to be perfect (because utopia brings us back to sameness). We want to constantly become and keep moving (Kumashiro 2000, 45-46). This is a type of education that passes on a message of what I call desirable unfinishedness. Desirable unfinishedness is about acknowledging students as beings in the process of becoming. They are unfinished as people and live in an equally unfinished reality (Freire 1970, 57). Making students aware of this will increase self-confidence because they are taught that it is okay to be wrong and to be convinced by valid arguments that one had not thought of before. It is okay not to know everything because learning is an infinite process. Because everything is ever-changing, education must also constantly be remade. In order to be, it must *become* (Freire 1970, 57).

Empathy and engagement

Now that we have seen what anti-oppressive education entails, I want to move on to show its significance in explaining how it relates to empathy and political engagement. We have already explored how anti-oppressive education fuels empathy: empathy can be stirred up by visibility (of the people who are othered). However, we have also seen that empathy cannot be a panacea, as it does not necessarily disrupt the us-them binary, whereby the self goes uninspected. Empathy alone, then, is not the connector between knowing and acting. In what follows, I will show why empathy is still crucial: in leading us to compassion and self-reflection.

When I think about empathy, I would describe it as feeling *with* or being able to imagine being in someone else's shoes. In fact, empathy has no universally accepted definition (Gerdes 2011). Compassion theorist Hooria Jazaieri explains that empathy can be defined as the capacity to be affected by and share the emotional state of another, together with the capacity to assess the reasons for the other's state, and the capacity to identify with the other, adopting their perspective (2018, 24). This means that one is *touched* by another's feelings, can *understand* why the other is feeling this way and can *imagine* how it must feel to be in the other person's shoes.

The general idea is that anti-oppressive education fuels empathy primarily by teaching students about the lives of others (visibility). By disrupting their sense of normalcy by showing differences and diversity, it becomes clear that there are other ways of living and other ways of being. The link between knowledge about people who are othered and an emotional response to this knowledge is not immediately clear, but the route to such a response must start with information. We must indeed be careful not to confuse empathy with pity since pity often involves the idea that the person one pities is inferior or weaker (Jazaieri 2018, 24). However, empathy *can* and often does come from feeling bad for someone who is suffering. To become aware of suffering and develop concern, one must break out of the bubble of normalcy and be informed about the lives of others.

As we have seen, anti-oppressive education is a way to cultivate empathy in the classroom. But how, then, do we go from empathy to political participation? I believe that the desire to make a change and, therefore, to be politically involved comes from caring. As we know, privilege means that one is not experiencing oppression (in a certain area), which makes it easier to look away and not get involved: privilege means that one is benefited by the status quo and has no (selfish) reason to want to make a change. The dominant groups in The Netherlands and most of the West are still white, heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied

and middle-class people: these identity aspects are the building blocks of our normative society. In order to stir up students' desire to be politically active, they must learn about differences. However, anti-oppressive education is not just *for* the dominant groups. With its effects, we hope to benefit the marginalized. This means that through anti-oppressive education, the marginalized will hopefully become less marginalized. In the high school environment, a matching goal would be to reduce or even eliminate bullying. Later in life, it could mean equal opportunities and eliminating systemic problems of exclusion, like racism. It is, however, also a way for the marginalized Other to regain hope, feel acknowledged, seen and represented, and learn that they have a voice they can use. Teaching our students about differences, though, may not immediately lead to a desire for action. It seems empathy itself is not enough. From empathy, we need to move on to compassion.

In the *Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology*, Sherlyn Jimenez (2009) defines compassion as "being moved by the suffering of others such that one desires to relieve or make bearable that suffering" (209). Compassion thus shares characteristics with empathy, but the difference is that compassion includes a clear intention to see a relief of suffering or a motivation to act (Jazaieri 2018, 23). Instead of focusing on sharing another's emotional state, compassion focuses more on recognizing the other's state while also having one's own affective experience of that suffering. Besides empathy's cognitive component (awareness of suffering) and its affective component (being emotionally moved), compassion includes an intentional component (a wish to see a relief of suffering) and a motivational component, which equals responsiveness or readiness to help relieve suffering (Jazaieri 2018, 24). The difference between these two states is, in affective terms, very blurry. Jimenez (2009) writes that empathy is a capacity and a process rather than an emotional state, and compassion is experienced when one responds to someone else in trouble (210). Empathy and compassion are often present simultaneously as empathy is often very quickly followed up by compassion. However, that does not make the motivational component any less crucial since this is what leads to participation and action. In moving from empathy to compassion, anti-oppressive education is a crucial tool since it helps to start utilizing compassion's readiness to take action by providing students with handles to engage in dialogue, unlearning, critically reassessing knowledge and experiences gained in the past, and self-reflection. As explained earlier, unconsciously, people generally feel resistance to change and a desire for repetition. Repetition is comfortable because it means one knows what will come. Challenging things one took for granted or things one thought were certain can lead to crisis or anxiety. This is why anti-oppressive teaching must also involve room to work through crises. Concrete ideas

about utilizing compassion's readiness for action in the high school context are still lacking. In speaking to high school students and thinking about their experiences, this thesis will start to fill this knowledge gap.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In this chapter, I will describe the research process, explain my choice of methods and detail the different stages of the research, such as selecting the participants, collecting the data and analysing the data.

In order to argue for an elaborate implementation of anti-oppressive education in Dutch high schools and show how it can lead to an increased willingness to take action amongst students, I conducted semi-structured interviews with former high school students. In order to chart student perceptions of anti-oppressive components, students had to be the focal point. Teachers will definitely have useful things to say about student behaviour and perhaps student perceptions, but the students themselves know best what they perceived and how they felt about it.

While it would be interesting to look at legislation and policy on anti-oppressive elements in The Netherlands, or the amount of attention for anti-oppressive education in teacher's training, I decided to focus on the experiences of former high school students because I believe the implementation of anti-oppressive education, eventually, should be to *their* benefit (especially those students who are often othered). Moreover, no matter how good the intentions of implementing anti-oppressive education are, or no matter how complete policy, legislation, rules or curriculum choices may seem when approached from the top down, when aiming for change and transformation, we always need to keep the future generation in mind. The intentions from above might reflect (a sense of) awareness of a politics of difference, while the classroom dynamics remain conventional, business as usual (hooks 1994, 180). This means that the *plan* made to address a politics of difference means very little as long as the classroom environment remains the same. Therefore, I decided to approach the implementation of anti-oppressive education from the bottom up. It is the students who need to notice and grow from the efforts that are made.

I focused on students who graduated this year or last year because I wanted the participants to be able to reflect upon a finished stage of their lives that they do not have to go back to. This way, they were able to make claims about their experience of high school: they experienced the full curriculum. I wanted the participants' memories to still be somewhat fresh because it could be that anti-oppressive components are present in details or small nuances, which is why I decided to exclude students who graduated in 2019 or earlier.

I started recruiting participants with the help of my good friend and activist Nanoah Struik, who has a big platform on Instagram with a lot of young (LGBTQ+) followers.

Furthermore, I posted my own calls for participants on Instagram and Facebook. We both posted the same call, which can be found in Appendix C. I also approached some students through a personal message directly. Because I work at a high school, I had the opportunity to approach my own students and ask them to join my study. However, I decided to try and recruit participants with less of a close connection to me in order to prevent them from giving me answers they think I want to hear, or politically correct answers, because I am their tutor.

The following table offers information about the participants in this research:

Name	Age	Ethnicity	Sexuality	Gender identity	High school degree
Donna	19	Caucasian/White (Dutch)	Heterosexual	Cisgender female	VWO 2020
Jesse	18	Caucasian/White (Dutch)	Bisexual	Cisgender male	VWO 2021
Yrsa	19	Caucasian/White (Dutch)	Heterosexual	Cisgender female	VWO 2020
Otis (altered name)	20	Caucasian/White (Dutch/Italian)	Heterosexual	Transgender male	VWO 2020
Samuel	19	West-African native/Black (Ghanaian)	Heterosexual	Cisgender male	VWO 2020

Because I explicitly focused on the experiences and perceptions of the students, the study has a phenomenological research design. A phenomenological study focuses on experience from the perspective of the individual and their experiences of certain phenomena. I greatly value lived experiences as a basis for knowledge and believe that it would have been impossible to approach my research questions from an objective, neutral point of view. Education in itself is never neutral (hooks 1994, 198). Especially when discussing anti-oppressive education, which focuses on one's personal location, situatedness and intersectionality, the desire to remain objective is delusional.

The choice to conduct interviews was easily made: while I could quickly collect more data by using surveys, I wanted to be able to engage in personal conversations with the participants. These are not just student perceptions but also my interpretations of their experiences. This is why it is crucial to enter into a dialogue with the participant. I wanted to make sure whether my interpretations aligned with their experience. Moreover, I wanted to be *present* while they shared their experiences and opinions because some of the things we discussed were personal and possibly confidential.

Whenever possible, the interviews took place on site. However, due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions and the geographical distance between myself and some of the participants, one of the interviews took place via Zoom. I tried to limit the number of online interviews to a bare minimum because I consider physical proximity to be an important factor. When discussing sensitive topics, emotions are present that are difficult to convey in a digital environment.

The interviews were semi-structured and guided by the interview guide in Appendix A. I generally prefer to conduct semi-structured interviews because they allow one to enter into a dialogue with a sense of direction (which also helps prevent too much distraction), but it also leaves room for the participant's input and room to ask new questions that come up during the conversation. Because I was also interested in what the participants would want to ask me about this study or about the topic, I emphasized at the beginning of each interview that I would like them to think of the meeting more as a reciprocal conversation – a dialogue, and not an interrogation with a researcher in charge.

With the theoretical framework in mind, I decided to format the following list of components to highlight the core of anti-oppressive education and to be able to discuss several sides of anti-oppressive education in a relatively small and single timeframe. Some of the components are based on Zinga & Styres' "Decolonizing Curriculum" (2019, 33):

1. Active promotion of diversity and inclusion throughout the curriculum as well as through the school as an organisation (for example diversity of the staff)

2. Attention for mutual respect and empathy and room for emotions and feelings

3. Attention for the structural functioning of privilege and oppression (society operates within a socially constructed hierarchy of difference based on relations of power and privilege)

4. Attention for identity formation and the fluidity of identities

5. Disrupting and challenging norms/the status quo and explanation of the structures behind the status quo (dominant cultural values becoming normalized as a standard of comparison by which everything and everyone is compared)

6. Attention for intersectionality, situatedness, positionality and lived experiences

7. Room for dialogue and critical (self)reflection and room to work through the crises and feelings of discomfort that come with anti-oppressive education and the aspect of unlearning

In the conversations, I wanted to find out whether the student knows what anti-oppressive pedagogy means and, if so, how they learned what this means (did they learn it in school?). If they did not know about its meaning, I explained it to them briefly. Secondly, I wanted to talk about whether they recognized the school's efforts of implementing anti-oppressive components. Concretely, this means: did the student **notice** while in class (or elsewhere in the school environment) that there was attention for any of the anti-oppressive components? I discussed with the students the seven components mentioned above. I asked them whether they felt these components were present in their high school experience. Finally, I discussed with the student their opinions on whether current efforts to implement anti-oppressive components are enough or lacking and what would be the value of more attention for AOE at school.

To analyse the gathered data, I recorded most of the interviews. One of the participants requested that I did not record our conversation. In this case, I typed along while we spoke. I transcribed all of the interviews and conducted general coding in order to recognize prevalent themes. Along with my own thoughts and ethnographic insights, these themes were my guide in writing chapters 3 and 4.

The topics discussed and the experiences that I asked the participants to share are sensitive. Moreover, although the participants are not underage, they are still very young. Hence, I wrote clear information and informed consent sheets, so that (potential) participants knew what they agreed to. Furthermore, I emphasized that opting out always remained possible and that anything participants did not want to discuss or answer would just be left out of my eventual analysis, or we could skip over the question or the issue in case the participant did not want to discuss a particular theme with me. One of the participants requested to remain anonymous; therefore, I am using a different name to discuss his experiences.

Concerning my desire to form a diverse group of participants, I had to remain alert in order to prevent people of colour, members of the LGBTQ+ community or people with other minority

identity aspects from feeling like spokespeople for marginalization. This is why I continually emphasized that it was the participants' choice what they shared with me.

I, a white, cisgender woman, in no way want to make more room for my (privileged) voice or pretend I know everything about this topic. Coming from a (philosophical) Gender Studies academic background, I think I can claim a certain degree of expertise, but in no way have I experienced severe oppression or marginalization, and in no way was I personally disadvantaged by a possible lack of anti-oppressive components during my time in high school. I was aware of this when I entered the research process and continually reminded myself of this during the process. This thesis, then, is only a small contribution to the efforts that are needed to reform education.

The knowledge produced in this research is partial and cannot be generalized due to a plurality of subject standpoints and my own position's influence on the research. Despite ongoing efforts to remain neutral, my identity markers and location are very much present in this research and continuously affect my research choices. For example, despite my efforts to form a diverse group of participants, it is clear that the students that responded to my call for interviewees have some sort of connection to me. We share, for example, our commitment to feminism and gender diversity. Moreover, one of the participants went to the same high school as me, and our fathers are close friends. However, our appointment for the interview was the first time we personally met, or I would not have chosen to include her. Finding participants from completely different social positions turned out to be difficult and extremely time-consuming.

The analysis in the upcoming chapters should be approached as the personal stories and experiences from a selected group of former high school students who can in no way speak for others. My interpretation of the students' stories and experiences are shaped by my positionality continuously, as well as by the language used (by myself as well as the participant) and the critical Gender Studies lens from which I look at these experiences. However, the words and experiences of these students matter because they can help us consider different perspectives and outlooks on the high school experience in order to turn this system into a better fit for all. Students see and experience things that staff or policymakers do not see from the top. Students are the ones living through the curriculum and rules that people in power created. Furthermore, high school, or more generally the realm of education, is a space that nearly all of us engage with in crucial developmental phases of our lives. This makes it difficult to work with a personal, customized approach for each student. As a result, the system will always primarily revolve around the experiences of the majority.

Listening to students' personal stories contributes to highlighting the things that do not always come to light. This will help in the continuous practice of shaping and improving education, which is the foundation of dealing with youth's disinterest in politics and the democratic deficit.

Chapter 3: The presence of anti-oppressive components

In this section, I will discuss the extent to which Dutch former high school students noticed anti-oppressive components in the curriculum or in the school environment. In general, it became clear from my conversations with the students that they did notice the *effort* to implement some forms of anti-oppressive education over the years. However, most participants expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the efforts made by the school. The students primarily recognized components of anti-oppressive education in extra-curricular projects and activities like "Paarse Vrijdag" (an annual spirit day in The Netherlands on the second Friday of December to show solidarity with members of the LGBTQ+ community and demand attention for sexual and gender diversity by wearing purple) (GSA Netwerk, 2020). Moreover, efforts to implement anti-oppressive education were recognized in mentoring sessions and personal engagement with teachers, and in civics classes ("Maatschappijleer'' (compulsory class) and "Maatschappijwetenschappen'' (elective) in Dutch), History classes and Philosophy (worldview; "levensbeschouwing'' in Dutch) classes.

Anti-oppressive education in Dutch high schools

Most of the students I spoke with had not seen the term ''anti-oppressive education'' before they saw my call for interviewees or read my message in which I approached them directly. None of the participants knew how to explain the term but most did have an accurate association. Jesse mentioned systemic discrimination and fair chances in education, while Otis referred to remaining politically neutral (in expressing yourself) and ''being accepting towards others''. Donna said it made her think of making sure you do not impose a certain way of thinking upon students. They were all quick to emphasize that they had never heard this term at school. Instead, most had made these associations from talking to friends, browsing social media and reading the information sheet for this study.

In all of my conversations with the students, one of the first questions I asked them, before going into more detail, was whether they felt their high school made efforts to implement anti-oppressive education (after briefly explaining the meaning of the term). Most participants expressed a sentiment that the desired outcomes (of banishing oppression and creating equality) are not yet achieved, despite visible efforts. Most participants mentioned that they thought their school was at the very least *trying* to promote and convey a message of equality. When asked what made them think this, Purple Friday and a rainbow flag in front of

the school were often mentioned. Some mentioned that there were posters on the school's walls promoting sexual and gender diversity, mostly from the Gender and Sexuality Network (GSA Netwerk). Most of these posters are promotions for Purple Friday or the gender and sexuality alliance present in the school.

A Dutch gender and sexuality alliance poster by GSA Netwerk with definitions of non-binary, cisgender, intersex, queer, bisexual, asexual and hypersexual identities, references to critical activist days like Purple Friday, Coming Out Day and the Day of Silence (against bullying), and suggestions for help.

Furthermore, most participants affirmed that it was ''common knowledge'' at school that discrimination in any form was unacceptable. However, participants also had clear memories of discriminatory behaviour at school. Most participants felt that the efforts made by the school were still lacking and that this requires more attention.

Diversity and inclusion at school

When asked about the school's active promotion of diversity, Yrsa mentioned a project day on LGBTQ+ acceptance. Donna also had a vague memory of such a day. Concerning antiracism, the students affirmed that nothing came to mind. Jesse told me there was no

explicit attention for diversity and inclusion, except when a classmate came out as transgender. Because of this, one mentoring session ("mentorles" in Dutch) was organised for the entire class to discuss this and generate some understanding and empathy. This could be seen as a form of education for the Other: the session was organised to support the student who came out as transgender (Kumashiro 2000, 26-27).

It seems like LGBTQ+ acceptance is the leading way in which diversity is promoted. There can be several reasons for this. Firstly, the students I spoke to are likely to remember and bring up this type of diversity promotion because of its visual components, such as the poster above. Secondly, GSA promotion is free of charge and easy to implement: materials such as the GSA Network posters are available to order online for schools for free. Alliances are often initiated by students, which means the school itself is by no means always doing the work. Thirdly, all participants knew they were talking to a Gender Studies scholar, which could be why they made a connection to LGBTQ+ acceptance early in our conversation. Finally, gender and sexuality are increasingly popular topics among young people. The spread of (popular) feminism and the so-called "woke-culture" has led to more global awareness, which could be why schools feel they must catch up with this progress. In other words, being loud and demanding attention do work in terms of agenda-setting. Whether you *reach* the students you want to reach with the message you want to convey is a different issue.

Thoughts on the diversity of the student population were mixed. Donna and Otis thought of their school as predominantly white. Yrsa called her school multicultural, and Jesse also mentioned that students of colour were present, although vastly outnumbered. Concerning staff diversity, most of the students I spoke with confirmed that all of their teachers during their time at high school were white. Jesse was the only exception, with two teachers of colour. The rest mentioned some teachers of colour at school (primarily men), but not among their own teachers. Moreover, none were black. None of the students recalled an explicit statement from the school on the value of diversity. However, some did mention that their teachers expressed being in favour of diversity by actively fighting bullying behaviour or mentioning the value of having a diverse population, but some also had openly racist teachers. Jesse, for example, told me that frequently, if a white student showed bold or undesirable behaviour, they would get a soothing warning, but when a black student showed the same behaviour, they would be expelled from the classroom.

The fact that teachers are predominantly white means that if ethnic oppression and racism are discussed in the curriculum at all, the information will mostly be coming from a

white person. Their knowledge cannot be based on lived experiences, and students of colour present in the classroom could feel uncomfortable and unrepresented. Yrsa expressed a similar feeling, mentioning that "a white teacher can never know what racism is like" and "staff did not represent the student population, which results in a lack of connection".

In civics class, most students were taught about the meaning of discrimination and racism. Donna told me that she was shown a video on police profiling from which it became clear that people of colour are arrested sooner than white (passing) people doing the same thing. Most students also clearly remembered history lessons in which slavery was discussed, although both Yrsa and Jesse emphasized that it was never discussed *elaborately*. In contrast, World War II and antisemitism were discussed elaborately at most students' schools.

The place of feelings and emotions in the educational realm

I spoke with the students about how much they think there was a standard of mutual respect and empathy for others at school. They all shared mostly good personal experiences. Most deemed it self-explanatory that mutual respect was the standard at school. Yrsa shared that some students came out as transgender at her school, after which the school took action to facilitate gender-neutral toilets. However, she emphasized that these toilets were only located in one corner of the school. Toilets that were not used often by the students were transformed into gender-neutral toilets. Yrsa deemed this a good start, but not enough effort: the school is big and has multiple wings and multiple stand-alone buildings. Wanting to use the gender-neutral bathroom could easily mean having to walk for over ten minutes. However, facilitating gender-neutral toilets when there is a demand for this is another way of implementing education for the Other: the school, however minimal in this case, is making an effort to be a helpful space. Moreover, the school recognizes that students will, indeed, bring gender and sexuality to school: they are part of one's identity and cannot be left at the entrance (Kumashiro 2000, 28-29).

Personally, Yrsa never experienced that it was necessary for the school to state that students needed to respect each other. She never experienced extreme bullying behaviour in her surroundings. Donna expressed similar sentiments and mentioned that teachers were always tolerant and respectful. Jesse spoke of his circle of friends at school as diverse and accepting, but also expressed some doubts about mutual respect and empathy in the school. He and his friends mostly stuck together and did not feel the urge to connect with other students. This also came from a mild fear of not being entirely accepted by other students. One can thus

wonder if the school made enough efforts to be a place where normalcy is not assumed and differences are embraced.

Moreover, one can wonder whether schools should engage more with students' sense of belonging, which, as Yuval-Davis (2012) argued, includes three significant analytical facets (social locations, identifications and emotional attachments and ethical and political values). A narrative of identity (narrative here means that the production of identity is always in process and never fixed or finished), which is not as much a social location such as gender or ethnicity, but in the high school context more of a personal style, or the subcultures that exist, is a necessary condition for agency and subjectivity to exist (Spivak 1994). Belonging, then, is critical to people's emotional balance and well-being (Yuval-Davis 2012).

On the other hand, the fear of not belonging brings us back to the unclear link between knowing and acting (Kumashiro 2000, 38-39). As a school, you can only do so much to radiate a message of equality to your students and promote diversity and differences. You can make sure your students *know* about this, but the question remains to what extent you can control that your students also *act* accordingly. Thus, there is tension between words and actions on the part of the school. Especially with adolescents, frequently placing themselves at the center, preoccupied with the problems happening in their personal lives, it is challenging to alter unwelcome and non-empathic behaviour. Adolescents are also known to rebel for the sake of rebellion, which could lead to the exact behaviour that the school is trying to prevent. Moreover, the school needs to act according to its message of equality: if staff members do not show empathic behaviour that fits with a message of equality, students will only learn that words of affirmation have no meaning in practice.

Concerning the expression of personal feelings and emotions at school (which is different from stating one's opinion in a classroom debate), most of the students felt like there was not much room. Most did share with me that there was room for *collective* emotions: when something concerned a group of students or the entire school, like the passing of another student or a teacher, measures were taken to support students in coping with sadness and grief. However, I was especially curious about whether the students felt it was possible to express (personal) emotions during class or elsewhere in the school environment. This also entails emotional responses to the content of teaching material. Yrsa said this was dependent on which teacher was teaching the class. She shared that she often felt the urge to emotionally respond to the content, for example when she felt that a certain injustice was not given enough attention. She said there was room for her response, but it would usually be rebounded with a critical reply. Coming from a low-income family, Yrsa would sometimes

get mad if another student would complain about the amount of taxes that have to be paid by people with high incomes. She said: "I was like, 'Oh, how annoying for you that your parents are rich.' and the teacher slightly corrected me, telling me to calm down a little bit." When I asked why she thought her teacher corrected her, she told me it could be because the teacher disagreed with her, but "also because he did not think this discussion was useful, and wanted to move on with the class". This experience is revealing and can function as testimony to my hypothesis that schools in the Netherlands lack education outside of the so-called banking system of education. This system is based on the assumption that memorizing information and regurgitating it represents gaining knowledge that could be deposited, stored, and used later (hooks 1994, 5). This system turns students into passive consumers instead of active participants: the classroom is not seen as a space suitable for emotions. Students come to school merely to gather knowledge. Of course, from the stories of the students, it becomes clear that it is not the standard per se to be turned into a *completely* passive consumer as a student. There is some degree of stimulated critical thinking and room to express opinions. However, personal and emotional development are still seen as something that is to stay outside of the educational realm, as it prohibits the class from moving on as planned. It confirms the idea that deviating from the lesson plan is undesirable and that teaching is still mostly about repetition and affirmation (Kumashiro 2000, 43).

Explaining privilege and oppression at school

None of the students I spoke with learned about the structural functioning of privilege and oppression in high school. This is striking because these structures are at the very roots of our society, determining what life looks like for certain groups of people and what life looks like for the individual. Donna and Otis had some memories of being explained the concept of privilege, but never in relation to oppression. Donna told me that the concept of white privilege was discussed in class, followed immediately by a discussion about whether white privilege even exists, and if so, whether it is a problem. However, all students were able to explain to me to some degree what privilege and oppression mean. When I asked them how they learned about this, Donna, Yrsa and Jesse all mentioned the murder of George Floyd (May 25, 2020, Minnesota, USA), leading to worldwide protests against police brutality and police racism, and a new wave of Black Lives Matter protests around the world. Donna emphasized that she thinks the new generation of high school graduates would not question the existence of white privilege, mainly due to the movement that spread on social media

after Floyd's killing. Samuel shared this opinion and told me that he thinks the younger generations are increasingly finding the connection between themselves and social justice issues, which makes them more eager to act.

Donna also mentioned a memory of a class debate on the wage gap between men and women. The fact that this was presented to the class as a topic to debate about, instead of a mere fact (women do make less money than men while doing the same amount of work), is striking to me, for one can question whether the wage gap should be closed and what measures to do this are suitable, but one cannot deny the existence of the wage gap itself.

Jesse and Yrsa learned about the structural functioning of privilege and oppression through their online research and through speaking about it with friends. The amount of available free time because of the pandemic and the amount of attention for the BLM movement on social media motivated Yrsa to find out more about this topic. She did this by reading a lot, following justice-oriented social media platforms and discussing with her friends.

Attention and support for identity formation

Similar to how schools are not deemed suitable places for emotions, schools are also not seen as institutions that necessarily need to make room for identity formation. It is common knowledge that teenagers are developing a personal identity and finding out whom they want to be, which can also entail forms of rebellious bahaviour. From my conversations with the students, though, it became clear that even though the students generally see high schools in The Netherlands as tolerant and accepting places, there is not much specific attention for identity formation, nor are students taught that identity is something fluid and ever-changing. When asked about this topic, most of the students pointed out again that the school was tolerant. Yrsa pointed back at the gender diversity workshop, the gender-neutral bathrooms and the promotional posters. Donna said: "The school accepted everyone for who they are, but there was never explicit attention for identity formation." Samuel also expressed this sentiment. Some recalled learning in civics class the meaning of the term identity, but only through discussing the theoretical frameworks surrounding identity, culture and group formation, and not through any form of personal connection to identity.

The one exception was the experience of Otis, who went to a Jenaplan high school. Otis shared with me a memory of a classmate who used "gay" as a swear word, after which the teacher took the time to discuss with the class that there were probably gay people in the classroom and what it means to use this word as a swear word. This entails deviating from a

lesson plan and creating space for things that matter at that time. It is a clear example of education that changes students and society, as it shifts the focus to the way society contributes to specific practices of citationality like the usage of the word "gay" as a swear word. Only through intervening and speaking up can this word be reclaimed (Kumashiro 2000, 42).

Moreover, Otis had memories of doing exercises on introversion and extraversion during mentor classes. He also emphasized that differences between people were constantly celebrated at school: students and teachers were always vocal about their appreciation for uniqueness and diversity. Another thing that stood out in my conversation with Otis was that he shared that students and teachers had more of a horizontal connection than a vertical one at his school. To Otis, this means that his teachers stood *next* to him more than *above* him. He also attributed this to the size of the school: there were only about 200 to 300 students. Students were allowed to address teachers by their first names. Other common practices were chatting with teachers after class and teachers being very open with their students and sharing a lot about their lives. Moreover, activities often did not have to do with the school as a learning institute per se, but more with the school as a social institute and a place for personal and social development. One example mentioned by Otis was sleepover parties at school. For Otis, this meant that their connection felt more personal and that his teachers felt more approachable to him.[3]

Intersectionality in the curriculum

During all of my conversations with the students, I discussed the meaning of intersectionality. In short, intersectionality indicates the interaction between gender, race, and other categories constitutive of particular identities. The term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) and was intended to identify how interlocking systems of power impact those who are most marginalized in society. Crenshaw pleaded for a more accurate reflection of the interaction between race and gender because this intersectional experience is greater than just the sum of racism + sexism. This means that a black woman does not just experience racism one moment and sexism the next, but she also experiences these types of oppression simultaneously: she is not dealing with a summation of oppression, but a multiplication of oppression, which completely alters the experience. Therefore, any analysis that does not

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[3] Because of Jenaplan education's clear similarities to anti-oppressive education, this paper initially included a discussion on some of the Jenaplan principles and connections to anti-oppressive education. This section has been deleted due to a lack of available space, but can be found below in Appendix D.

look at this intersection cannot fully address black women's oppression (Crenshaw 1989, 140). The same goes for other types of oppression. Intersectionality is not just about black women's experiences but about every experience of oppression and how this experience is shaped by identity. None of the students besides Yrsa (who openly identifies as a feminist) immediately recognized the term, and none of them besides her was able to explain its meaning. After I explained its meaning, most did recognize it and told me they had seen the word on social media, primarily in connection to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, when many social media posts with information graphics circulated. Donna, Sam, Jesse and Otis had also come across the word on social media, but they had never heard it at school. Yrsa specifically pointed to the Dutch feminist podcast *Damn, Honey*, where she first heard the word intersectionality. In speaking to her feminist friends, she deepened her understanding of its meaning. The school did not contribute to her understanding of intersectionality in any shape or form. This is not against my expectations. Outside the field of Gender Studies or generally the social sciences, intersectionality is not a well-known concept. However, the issue it addresses is something that matters to everyone and including it in the curriculum could illuminate many contemporary issues. The idea of a subjective standpoint, different opinions and being mindful of other outlooks is familiar, but the vital connection to one's political and social position is missing.

Intersectionality is an ambiguous term, which is seen as a strength by some and as a weakness by others. Sam emphasized that he thought introducing new terms like intersectionality at school would not have a substantial effect. He said:

> I think words like that do not always say so much. You can come up with new words, but they will most likely turn into jargon, accessible only to experts in the field. Students who are not as invested in the problems that the word points out will be put off by lengthy, complicated-looking terms that they do not know.

We talked about this for some time, and our discussion reminded me of the debate on intersectionality's ambiguity, a topic I wrote about in the past (Feltmann 2020). It has, indeed, been argued that intersectionality's vagueness is a considerable shortcoming. As intersectionality is viewed more and more as the paradigmatic illustration of the progress in feminism (towards inclusivity), it is argued that feminism has lost the *simple and coherent* category of gender as the focal point of its work (Nash 2019, 15). This is why

intersectionality has been argued, as by Wendy Brown (2001), to be part of Gender Studies' *incoherence*: it has led to the fracturing of feminism in trying to grasp an "impossible etc.". This argument says that an infinite regression is undesirable (Nash 2019, 15-16).

Moreover, theories can lose their originality and critical viewpoint when entering into various disciplines (Collins 2015, 6). Again, a broad application of a theory can also result in the loss of a specific category of focus. These arguments directly defy the idea that the broad lens of intersectionality and its applicability in different disciplines are positive things. Connecting this to Dutch high school education, one could argue that it is indispensable to focus on coherence. Adolescents already have a lot on their plate and are going through very formative years. The amount of information they are required to process and store is enormous, and we could wonder to what extent there is room for, perhaps, indeed, jargony concepts like intersectionality. However, as I also discussed with Sam: the value of learning about intersectionality lies not in knowing the word or developing new concepts altogether. It lies in *awareness* and *informedness* about the issue that intersectionality addresses, namely that experiences of oppression are highly personal.

Furthermore, and perhaps this is a biased opinion coming from a Gender Studies scholar, but intersectionality is not as much inaccessible jargon as it is *the very core of Gender Studies*. If we want to make sure we cover different disciplines in the high school curriculum, intersectionality should be included at the very least. The other students agreed with me that intersectionality should be something that is addressed in high school. Otis, for example, said:

> I think it would be useful for myself as well. If you enter situations from this perspective, you will realize that every individual can look at the same thing differently because of their experiences and knowledge.

Positionality and situatedness

Besides intersectionality, I spoke to the students about positionality - one's location or one's identity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality and ability, and how this influences your view and interpretation of the world - and situatedness, which, arguing against dualism of mind and world, emphasizes an ever-present *context*: information is situated, knowledge is situated, we are situated (Hesse-Biber 2011; Haraway 2002). Even though the students did not recognize the terms, some of them did recognize their meanings. Yrsa said that the school

did not emphasize positionality and situatedness but that she learned to distinguish her point of view from others'. A different outlook on things was seen at school as common knowledge. However, she added: "It was never explained *why* people have different outlooks on things." Jesse also told me that positionality and situatedness were never addressed, but he did clearly remember classes on research validity and reliability. Otis shared that frames of reference and selective perception were discussed.

Donna pointed to a civics class in which the social ladder was discussed. In this class, the influence of one's location on one's social position was briefly addressed. Donna referred to civics more than once, but it is vital to remember that she mostly referred to the *elective* class, not the compulsory class. The compulsory civics class is for all high school students. Students usually take this class for one semester or one year. For vwo and havo students, it covers basic research skills and four societal themes, i.e., the rule of law, the parliamentary democracy, the welfare state and the pluralistic society (Examenblad 2021). The main goal of the compulsory class is citizenship education. The elective class covers more in-depth scientific research skills and more elaborate societal themes, such as socialisation, power and authority, power relations, elections and political participation (Examenblad 2021). The goal of the elective class is not just citizenship education. The highest aim is understanding the structures and processes of society and living together. This means that for students who do not apply for the elective, many modest connections to anti-oppressive education that Donna mentioned are not there at all.

Positionality and situatedness are a crucial part of anti-oppressive education because they help to fuel in students the fundamental realization that their own experience, however valid and important, is not universal. This, then, contributes to the development of empathy for the people who are othered. Moreover, when applied to knowledge, learning about positionality and situatedness will help students become critical thinkers. For example, the high school History curriculum in The Netherlands mainly revolves around Dutch and European history. This makes sense because Dutch citizens need to know about their country's history, and every class in high school has to deal with the feeling that there is a lack of teaching time: not everything can be covered in high school. We will always have to prioritize specific topics. However, a focus on Dutch and European history does mean less focus on the history of other parts of the world. For black students in the Dutch classroom, this could result in a lacking sense of belonging because Dutch and European history revolve mainly around the experience of the white citizen. Moreover, a quick Google search for Feniks (a well-known Dutch high school History teaching method) reveals that the authors of the textbooks are not

clearly mentioned on the book's front cover, and there is also not a lot to find about them when searching for their names. I have not examined the Feniks textbooks, and while I do not doubt their usefulness, transparency and accountability for one's position as an author are crucial in the educational realm because an author's position offers essential information on the sort of text you are reading and the way the author's view might influence it. Stronger still, the privileging of whiteness in these disciplines becomes clear once you realize that a white, European student will learn about their race and history in the core curriculum of the class, while black, Asian or Middle-eastern students find lessons on their race and history only in some elective classes, if at all. Moreover, as is coming to the surface more and more: Dutch history is not covered in its entirety in the curriculum. For example, The Netherlands' complicity in slavery and colonialism is often mentioned but not discussed elaborately (Heilbron 2020). Explaining to our students that high school textbooks and curricula are also created by people with a particular positionality is thus crucial. Students tend to cling to their textbooks as if they tell the ultimate truth. Donna said:

> I remember that my civics or history teacher once warned us to remember that our textbook also has an author and that there are multiple ways of looking at things. I know for sure that I would have never thought about that if it had not been mentioned.

Alternatively, as Jesse and Samuel emphasized, sometimes students just do not attach a value judgment to a textbook at all but approach it as the information that must be remembered in order to pass a test. Looking back upon my own high school experience, I know that often, that was my way of making it through as well. Students are often so focused on passing, taken over by fear of failure and performance pressure, that there is hardly any headspace left to be a critical thinker. Considering that there is never enough teaching time, it is good to have something to hang onto and delineate the amount of information students need to know. However, it is equally important to emphasize that there is no such thing as the ultimate truth and that what is taught in school can never tell the full story.

Critical thinking and reflection
With anti-oppressive education comes critical thinking. These things go hand in hand because teaching anti-oppressively and receiving this type of education as a student require constant

alertness, questioning and unlearning of normalized practices and consideration of the ever-present context of everything you teach or are taught. It means that we teach our students to not blindly believe everything they are told, ask questions, be skeptical and take multiple perspectives into account. I spoke with the students about the extent to which they felt that their school was a space in which students were motivated to be critical, to engage in dialogue and to reflect. Otis told me that he thinks this was given enough attention in school. However, he pointed out an important possible explanation for this: the Dutch high school system emphasizes critical thinking for vwo students, as vwo is meant to prepare for a future in academics.

Vwo students are generally seen as capable of taking additional steps, and they are not expected to need everything spelled out for them. This means that the ability to think critically is trained more, especially in humanities-like classes that are open to subjectivity and interpretation (e.g., philosophy, civics, worldview). Donna shared that debates were often part of class, especially in civics, worldview classes and Dutch class. She said there was room to be critical. Donna, too, was a vwo student. Since all the students involved in this research were vwo students, I cannot make claims about critical thinking in other Dutch high school levels. Yrsa, Sam and Jesse told me that simple debates (for example on which companies were entitled to state aid during the Covid-19 pandemic) in which students learn how to argue were sometimes part of class. However, they did not feel like students were encouraged to engage in dialogue and discussion or be critical. The general sentiment that I got from them was that some discussions were a mandatory part of the curriculum, for example when students were asked to prepare a presentation and leave time open for a class discussion. However, having a critical attitude was not the norm at school, and neither was being self-reflexive, especially not in terms of behaviour and prejudices.

I also discussed with the students how critical they felt they could be towards teachers. What were the power dynamics like in the classroom? Was the teacher seen as the authority who tells the truth?

Sam said that questioning things the teacher said would happen after class, without a teacher around, more often than during class. This undoubtedly has to do with the power distribution in class and the normative idea that the teacher is always right. Even when you are sure that something a teacher said is not correct, you might question your own judgment more (because you are not the teacher) and decide to keep quiet. Practical things like questions the teacher created for a test (students often claim that questions were too difficult or included content that was never covered in class), or miscalculations in exact science classes, were

easier to bring up, according to Sam and Donna. However, students also expressed positive sentiments. Jesse, for example, felt like there was certainly room to ask the teacher questions. The teacher would also readily admit when they did not have a satisfactory answer to a question. This supports the idea that the teacher is not omniscient and that this is also not what is expected from a teacher. Donna said that a critical attitude towards the teacher was appreciated in philosophy class, where students were constantly motivated to ask questions. This fits with the very essence of philosophy, the discipline that questions everything constantly.

Unlearning

When I raised the topic of unlearning and going through a crisis, the students were confused. I had to explain to all of them what I meant by this. In explaining it to them, I addressed the example that I thought would be most familiar to them: the idea that we are all racist and biased in one way or another. As we have seen in chapter 1, anti-oppressive education, besides learning, requires *un*learning and the disruption of certain oppressive citational practices. My conversations with the students gave me the idea that it is implausible that a Dutch high school will ever actively promote the practice of unlearning. It seems as if this is mainly due to the fear of intervening in the private sphere too much, as it could mean that students unlearn things they learned at home. This could be seen as undesirable by schools because they want to perform according to parents' wishes, who ultimately decide where their child goes to school. Schools have an interest in being popular because a good reputation offers benefits like more government funding. Otis shared that unlearning was never addressed within the school curriculum, but it did come up during personal conversations with his teachers. In the conversation with this teacher, the frame of reference inherited from home was addressed. Besides Otis' school being a Jenaplan school, which probably means there is more room for such conversations, I also think it is safe, or at least safer, for a teacher to bring up unlearning when speaking to one student only, instead of a whole group.

A second reason for not promoting unlearning is a fear of promoting certain doctrines too heavily. Schools (primarily those without a specific life philosophy or religion) are often wary about maintaining a neutral position because they want to prevent being accused of propagating a certain doctrine to attract as many students as possible. Moreover, students spend so much of their time at school that there is generally no doubt that the school

environment will influence the development of students. Jesse seemed to agree that promoting unlearning is not the best thing to do when he said:

> I think the motivation for this [unlearning] must come from students themselves. It is a choice a student needs to make. … If a school actively preaches a certain opinion, this can be unfavourable for other opinions. There are boundaries. Schools should not impose certain choices and opinions upon students. They should, however, offer the space for students to do this and stimulate them to think about it.

 Yrsa said she had no recollection of unlearning ever being mentioned in school, and she thinks this is partly due to having white teachers only. She said:

> I mainly had white male teachers, who do not experience any form of oppression and therefore, do not see the urgency in spreading awareness about oppression, and about the fact that students can unconsciously be oppressive too.

For Yrsa, this link between unlearning and race comes from the idea that teachers of colour will *feel* the importance of unlearning (e.g., racist stereotypes) because they are living the reality of being racially targeted. This means they will also be more likely to recognize other harmful discourses or ideas that should be unpacked. White teachers, who fit the norm of whiteness, are less likely to understand or feel the urgency of unlearning. Ignorance and possibly indifference, then, is a third reason for not promoting unlearning.

Chapter 4: Benefits, dangers and requirements of anti-oppressive education

In the previous chapter, I offered a detailed analysis of my conversations with a group of former high school students on their perceptions of anti-oppressive components at school. In this chapter, I will be discussing their opinions and value judgments on changing the high school experience by more elaborately implementing anti-oppressive education. What would be the benefits or disadvantages of more attention for anti-oppressive education in Dutch high schools? Moreover, what would it yield for the students personally? These are some of the questions I will start to answer in this chapter.

Generally, the students I spoke to were in favour of changes to the curriculum and the school environment. Of course, it is hard to look at something that has the words *anti-oppressive* in its name as something undesirable. I did not elaborately discuss with the students whether or not anti-oppressive changes to the curriculum are feasible, for practical considerations do not lie with our students. They lie with the schools and on a bigger scale with our government and policymakers. However, to argue for changes to the educational system, student experiences and opinions are of immeasurable value since these students are the people we are trying to prepare for adulthood and life in a complex society. If students understand the meaning and value of anti-oppressive education, they are more likely to implement the things they learned later in life.

Here, I will introduce the suggestions that the students highlighted. Some of these things are suggestions for implementing anti-oppressive education in the educational system, like specific changes to the curriculum. Others are just feelings and opinions based upon their personal experiences. As mentioned before, it is essential to listen to individual students because students are the ones going through the high school experience, and they notice things we might not notice from our perspective. In the continuous practice of improving education, their stories will help make high school a safe and welcoming space for all students.

An extension of civics class

I asked the students what they thought was the most important class they had in high school. Four out of five answered that it was civics. Donna, for example, said: "With civics, it does not matter what you are going to do after high school: it will be useful in any case." Jesse said

something similar: "No matter the direction you want to go into, humanities or exact sciences, we all live in the same society."

Civics, or social sciences, however, is not a part of havo and vwo students' final exams and is usually only obligatory for one semester or one year. The grading for this class only counts for the so-called combination subject, which also consists of other non-exam subjects like worldview classes and CKV (cultural and artistic education). The combination grade, then, is the arithmetic average of those "small subjects" (College voor Toetsen en Examens, 2020). Many students view components of the combination subject as insignificant. I know this from my own time as a vwo student, and the students also confirmed it during our conversations. Moreover, I frequently see this in my job as a study coach. When students have an exam week coming up and must prioritize because they do not have enough time to prepare for every test, preparations for components of the combination subject will be the first thing they delete from their study schedule. The focus on passing or graduating leads to this prioritization, for the combination subject is not as weighty as final exam subjects. However, Sam also emphasized that he thinks students in civics class do not yet realize the importance of the class. When I asked him why, he said that he thinks students do not yet feel the connection between societal issues and their own lives. This brings me to the red thread of the students' opinions on civics: being taught about society's political and practical frameworks as is done in the limited time that students are in civics class, is not enough. What is lacking is an emphasis that this is about *real life* and *real people*, something most of these students only realized in their final year of high school or after.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire argues: "Implicit in the banking concept [of education] is a dichotomy between human beings and the world: a person is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or with others; the individual is spectator, not re-creator." (1970, 48). In other words, the *interaction* between students as *human agents* and the subject matter of civics is not highlighted enough. Subject matter is considered information that must be remembered to pass, and not much else. This was echoed by Yrsa, who said:

> In civics, you have to memorize the entire political system of The Netherlands (and sometimes Europe). I have long forgotten that. It [subject matter] is not about the *people* that this system is about. Yourself. It remains too abstract. Maybe there is too much objectivity. They are scared to discuss sensitive topics because they know it will lead to heated discussions. But this way, you prevent important things from being addressed.

The framework is there, but the substance is missing. Yrsa also said that she thinks schools are partly responsible for making sure students are ready to become part of society. Civics class should play a more prominent role in this, as this is the place where you learn about society. Anti-oppressive components like Kumashiro's four approaches can contribute to this goal because anti-oppressive education is connection-oriented par excellence. As we have seen, anti-oppressive education aims at equality by teaching students about the dominant structures at play in society, such as privileges for those closest to the norm. White privilege is a well-known example: because whiteness is seen as standard (and superior), white people receive benefits such as being more likely to be hired and being less likely to be accused of a crime (deserved or not) (McIntosh 1989). Disrupting oppressive structures can only be done by looking at our complicity with these structures, which is something young students need guidance in.

Donna and Sam both thought that younger generations of students, the ones in high school right now, will more often connect between societal issues and themselves. I asked Sam whether he thinks this is a good thing, but he was doubtful. He said that it is a good development in general but made two sidenotes. Throughout our conversation, Sam continuously emphasized the value of efficiency. He said that he does not always see the benefit of things like these and called himself cynical. Secondly, he expressed a fear of a lack of nuance. He said:

> Students are becoming more and more progressive… You see this in the curriculum as well. Left-wing teachers implement it in their teaching or in the way they judge right-wing parties. I think it should be emphasized a little more that everyone must find out for themselves what their opinion is. Nuance is often far from being found, which is also due to a need for everything to be quick. It has to be clear what everything means and what is happening immediately. This makes adding nuance much more difficult.

Sam added that young students are impressionable and tend to adopt certain opinions without question. This fear of a lack of nuance is something I also noticed in other students when I asked them whether they think a teacher should express their political preference at school. Jesse, for example, said that teachers should be able to express their opinion, but that the school needs to be wary of whom they hire in order to safeguard a diverse staff as regards the

political spectrum: "If a school has predominantly left-wing or right-wing teachers, I think they should be careful in promoting a certain political opinion."

Because the personal is political, we cannot get away from a political approach in education. Larger structures of power in society heavily influence things that happen in one's personal life: theories and politics are not distant from our personal lives. They are inseparably linked. Again, this applies to humanities classes more than to classes in the exact sciences. Civics, history, philosophy, geography, economics, arts, and language classes cover highly personal societal issues. Subject matter cannot always be neutral. Our ways of discussing these matters, teachers' ways of explaining them to students, and our feelings about these things are influenced by our positions. Education is, as is everything, political practice. Think, for example, about what it does to provide a good education to poorer people: it means handing them tools to advance in life. This is threatening to people in power. State-mandated curriculums are a power tool because they create opportunities to spread certain or conceal information. Even the fact that going to school is a legal obligation until the student gets a diploma or becomes 18 years old is telling of the political nature of education. These are things our students need to know in order for them to be as objective as possible.

Age and headspace

An additional question that keeps coming back for me, partly due to young children blindly copying some opinions, is about a suitable age to start the process of anti-oppressive education. This dilemma was also emphasized by the students, for example when some of them mentioned that it is hard to realize the importance of civics class as an adolescent who is occupied with themself more than with their surroundings. Intuitively, I would say that we should start as early as possible. The Dutch school system can easily start early on by working from certain (anti-oppressive) principles such as the Jenaplan principles (see Appendix D). Moreover, there are many easy-to-implement anti-oppressive exercises, for example the so-called "check-in", which I addressed in an earlier paper (Feltmann 2020). The check-in aims to resolve classroom tension and create space for students to express feelings and emotions. This can be an excellent way to start training in empathy as it trains the ability to be mindful of other people's feelings. However, a more structured and elaborate timeline for implementing anti-oppressive education in the Dutch educational system requires more research and must include efforts to protect a carefree childhood. A carefree childhood is a childhood in which the child is protected and allowed to grow in a stable and loving

environment while *slowly* being familiarized with natural hardships that come with life, such as illness, death and grief. It does not mean that the child is forced to face societal problems of injustice in a stage of development that does not yet allow them to grasp the underlying structures of power and exclusion. While I believe everyone should do their part in fighting exclusion, I also believe children are already doing their part by growing up. As adults, they will be more likely to do their part if they are mentally stable and have built a solid foundation for the rest of their lives.

More room for emotions and feelings

When I asked students whether there needs to be more room for mental well-being and emotions at school, they mostly responded in the affirmative, but with some side notes. Donna said students should never be pushed to share their feelings at school. However, the possibility to share your feelings should be highlighted more. Sam, too, said: "As a school, you cannot detect who has issues and needs help. It must be a voluntary process [coming from the student]."

Jesse was in doubt about whether the school should pay more attention to students' mental health. The school, he said, is not a psychological institute. On the other hand, Jesse emphasized that students spend most of their hours at school every week and that many things happening in students' lives are happening within the school environment. The question is thus whether schools can prevent being a partly psychological institute (i.e., an institute that is concerned with the mental state of its people).

More room for feelings and emotions at school does not necessarily mean that schools become psychological institutes that take care of students' mental health.[4] As discussed before, it can and must also mean room to respond to subject matter with emotion. There must be room for learning as a bumpy process, something nonlinear. Subject matter cannot simply be information to be memorized: some things *will* affect students, and that is okay. However, more time for emotional responses does mean less time for explanation on subject matter and less time to learn new things in the traditional way (the banking method of

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[4] Students, however, did bring up the importance of discussing mental health at school. Donna shared that there was never really any attention paid to mental illnesses at school. Only when she was older did she find out that there are so many different mental disorders. She strongly feels that this should be getting more attention, as this can help students recognize symptoms in themselves and others earlier and contribute to suitable treatment sooner. This important issue lies beyond the scope of this thesis and is therefore not discussed here.

education). When we spoke about responding to the subject matter with emotion, Sam came back to the value of efficiency. He said: "It depends on what you want to get out of the class. We can respond emotionally, but that means that there is less time for the actual lesson. There will be less time for explanation." However, he also noticed that some students and teachers appreciated emotions in the classroom. Emotional responses are *also* learning experiences for students that help them grow, however not in the dominant understanding of what efficient learning is, which comes down to processing as much information as possible in as little time as possible.

It is important to keep in mind that emotions in the classroom do not always imply that the emotions are negative. In *Teaching to Transgress,* hooks explains that excitement in education is often seen as potentially disruptive of the atmosphere of seriousness assumed to be essential to the learning process. hooks, however, advocates for classrooms in which excitement can co-exist or even stimulate serious intellectual engagement (1994, 7). In general, it is productive to view learning as something that can, indeed, generate excitement, or as hooks said: "Learning at its most powerful can liberate" (1994, 4). This includes the idea that the concept of normalcy is socially constructed. When you think of yourself as if you do not belong because you are different, this idea can be very liberating.

More room for identity, inclusivity and diversity

I asked the students whether they think schools should promote the fact that society and norms are *manufacturable*. In other words: should the school spread the idea that what is deemed "normal" is simply what we make of it? Jesse's answer to this was clear: yes, this should be promoted more. The idea that being yourself is never a bad thing, regardless of whether this fits with what society expects from you, is a message that schools should convey. Interestingly, Jesse phrased this negatively (in contrast to "being yourself is always a good thing"). While it could be a coincidence, I think it is revealing because we are taught that sometimes, being yourself may not be the smartest thing you can do. Think about a young child assigned male at birth who is exploring their gender and wishes to go to school in a dress. The parents object because they are afraid the child will be bullied. While well-intentioned and perhaps a safer choice at that time, this conveys a message of concealment. It may seem obvious that being yourself is important to promote, but why is this the case? According to Jesse, students are so impressionable in high school that they might follow the masses out of fear of acceptance and a desire to blend in and not stand out. Yrsa also shared

that she thinks there should be more attention for this message of inclusivity. She said that even though her school already celebrates Purple Friday, it could be transformed into an even bigger event. She emphasized that there needs to be an effort to implement inclusivity and diversity in the subject matter of several subjects. She said:

> I mostly had social subjects, so it [inclusivity and diversity] was more natural for me. Nevertheless, I think that even in social subjects there is room for improvement. You know, it's primarily teaching white kids about white people. It's not a very accurate representation of society, while my curriculum choices *were* focused on society. And those students who did and do not have social subjects… It's hard to implement inclusivity in those classes. It's not there. They are mostly white boys.

To build diversity and inclusivity into the curriculum, one could start by looking at the wording of math problems. What names and pictures are used in story sums? Moreover, in exact science classes, an effort could be made to include content from female scientists, scientists of colour and LGBTQ+ scientists.

Otis shared that he sent his tutor an email about his new name when he started his transition. His tutor received it very positively, and they informed his classmates so that he would not have to do that. Despite Otis feeling very supported by his school, also when he fell into a depression, he did say that he found himself looking for subject matter on identity formation at school and was unable to find this. He stated that the school fell short in this regard. Moreover, he mentioned that sex education at school was very normative. Sex was emphasized as meant for reproduction, not enjoyment, and it was mostly about heterosexual relationships. Anti-oppressive education must necessarily include diverse sex education: heteronormative sex education is not for all students and not about all students.

Learning how to live in the world

Anti-oppressive education is geared towards equality and the equal opportunity to be yourself and get your life in order. This does not just mean psychological equality - it means practical equality, too. A component that I know from the interviews many students feel is currently missing is support from school in learning about practical life matters like insurance, mortgages and taxes. Learning about practical matters is crucial for anti-oppressive education because it creates equal opportunities among students based on a (more or less) equal

foundation of knowledge on practical matters. If a student comes from a family where matters like insurance are neither understood nor explained, becoming 18 and having everything thrown at you will be much more difficult. Otis emphasized this, and Yrsa also mentioned this when she said schools are responsible for preparing students to become a part of society. Once again, we come back to the idea that school should assist in preparing you for *your life* and not just assist you in storing as much information as possible, performing well (according to capitalist standards) and eventually, making much money. hooks' call for education as a practice of freedom means that we do not merely share information with our students but also share in their intellectual and spiritual growth (1994, 13). This more holistic approach to education considers the importance of also gaining knowledge about *how to live in the world* (hooks 1994, 15). This means that we take education a bit further and acknowledge that there are more things students need to know to be free: things that might not fit in the current curriculum because they do not belong in an existing (Dutch) class. This could lead to a clash as some parents believe schools are not meant to raise children, or at least not in this aspect. However, I argue that this is inevitable because equality is inseparably linked to equal *opportunities*. Equal opportunities cannot exclude the opportunity to gain practical skills and knowledge. Beyond the scope of this thesis lie questions on how far this practical education should go (should it, for example, include self-care components like cooking?).

Education as the practice of freedom

In general, the students' opinions fit with the desire for more freedom in education. Freedom, here, does not mean that students are free to do whatever they please. It means that education will serve another, more liberating purpose, in which there is room for each student as a unique individual and in which there is room for the student to make a connection with the subject matter. This means that efforts need to be made to move away from the banking concept of education. Freire is dismissive of all aspects of the banking method of education: "Verbalistic lessons, reading requirements, the methods for evaluating "knowledge", the distance between the teacher and the taught, the criteria for promotion: everything in this ready-to-wear approach serves to obviate thinking." (1970, 49). This encapsulated why there is no freedom in the banking method of education: there is not enough interaction for authentic critical thinking and connection. Freire continues:

Oppression - overwhelming control - is necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life. The banking concept of education, which serves the interests of oppression, is also necrophilic. Based on a mechanistic, static, naturalistic, spatialized view of consciousness, it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power. (1970, 50)

In order to implement anti-oppressive education, then, schools need to fundamentally grasp that the banking concept of education is oppressive in itself. Instead of the banking method of education, Freire argues for the liberal concept of problem-posing education. Problem-posing education emphasizes critical thinking with the goal of liberation. It is strongly opposed to the so-called student-teacher contradiction, which puts most of the power and authority in the teacher's hands. Freire states that: "Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers *and* students." (1970, 45). This means that instead of a clear distribution of power in which the teacher decides everything, everyone present in the classroom learns from each other. This has everything to do with the students' ability to see the connection between their lives and subject matter. Problem-posing education does this through dialogue and turns the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher into teacher-student with students-teachers (Freire 1970, 53). The teacher learns with the students, and the students also teach. All are responsible for a collective process of growth.

The only student who described such a horizontal relationship with their teachers was Otis. We have seen the benefits of this type of student-teacher relationship: for students, it becomes easier to critically engage with teachers and the things teachers say. Furthermore, it leads to more opportunities for developing a personal connection with teachers. However, when I spoke to Sam about the student-teacher relationship, he clearly stated that he thinks this relationship should remain primarily vertical. He said:

It's OK to see a teacher as a friend, but the teacher is also responsible for you. If the relationship is too horizontal, you might surpass the whole student-teacher thing… That is just dangerous. I think that there is more room to be vulnerable if the student-teacher relationship is vertical. You know that a teacher will never fool you. This safety assurance means that students will be more honest: they will feel more comfortable telling teachers things they are too anxious to tell their friends. It is not

like it has to be strictly vertical, but there has to be a boundary. You need to feel like you can come to the teacher: the person with final responsibility.

This makes sense, as the teacher's final responsibility guarantees a sense of safety that children need. However, the student-teacher relationship that Freire, as well as hooks, argue for does not necessarily mean that the teacher does not have final responsibility. The teacher will still be the organizer of the class and the link between students and the school. There are thus aspects in which the responsibility still lies with the teacher. The *shared* responsibility is the responsibility for learning. All class participants are equally responsible for creating and maintaining a safe learning environment. Whether this is a practicable method will surely have to do with students' ages and perhaps their intellectual ability. These are issues outside the scope of this thesis that require further research.

I wonder how desirable and manageable complete refraining from the banking method is. While the ideal educational image may consist of total freedom, it is impossible not to worry about the hardships that would come with this. Even though freedom does not mean doing whatever we please, it *can* lead to more negative sentiments: more freedom also means less footing, less grip. It means increasing confusion, doubt and fear. It means more crises. These negative sentiments, however, are not undesirable per se because they imply movement. As discussed in chapter 1, movement is what advocates of anti-oppressive education aim for: we do not want perfection, which brings us back to sameness. We aim for constant transformation: to always stay on the way. Negative sentiments may not always be pleasant, but they are manageable and even desirable.

We are left with practical problems: problems of design and legislation. The ready-to-wear and one size fits all character of the banking concept of education is very convenient in terms of practicalities. Fully implementing anti-oppressive education is nearly impossible in the current educational framework. Multiple classes would need broadening. Perhaps there would even be a need for additional, new classes. School days would need to be longer, and with that, the general high school period. Curricula would have to be revised. And most of all, there would need to be legislation that allows for all this to happen. I talked about this for some time with Yrsa. She said: "I think there would be a knot in working this out politically. Left-wing parties would support the idea, but right-wing parties would emphasize liberty and say that teachers should remain neutral and not impose opinions upon students." And I think she is right. However, the interesting aspect is that the very *goal* of this change to education is liberty (through equality). Anti-oppressive education *is* education as the practice of

freedom. This is not always immediately clear. Thus, advocates of anti-oppressive education continue to be on the move: on the move to anti-oppressive Dutch high school education. Small steps in the right direction are still steps in the right direction. For the oppressed, a small step can be a leap forward. A single genderneutral bathroom in a huge school building is a leap forward for the non-binary student who is anxious to go to school every day because there is no restroom in which they feel at ease. For one out of very few black students at school, a black teacher that they can relate to can make a tremendous difference in feeling less out of place and more seen and acknowledged in their experiences. And for the student with depression or an anxiety disorder, creating space for expressing emotions and learning about mental health at school can be the tiny light needed to see that they are not alone and that what they are going through is valid. As hooks explains in *Teaching to Transgress*, only the privileged can waste resources (1994, 50). Dirty water is still water. Flawed progress is still progress.

Conclusion

In our complex multicultural society with low political participation amongst youth, we must remain alert to new ways to challenge and reshape established education. In this thesis, I have argued that to start doing this, we must turn to anti-oppressive education: ways of teaching and shaping a curriculum to work against oppression. Anti-oppressive education is a way to cultivate empathy in the classroom by increasing the visibility of marginalized groups and teaching students about a politics of difference. Moreover, anti-oppressive education helps us move from empathy to compassion, which includes a readiness to take action.

My conversations with five former high school students clarified that anti-oppressive education is not fully absent from the Dutch high school context, in their experience. All of them noticed efforts made by the school and its staff in one way or another. A common way that the students experienced efforts made by the school was through attention for sexuality and gender diversity. Other forms of oppression, e.g., racism, were not addressed as frequently, or these efforts were less evident to the students.

A recurring idea in my discussions with the students revolved around the banking method of education, which is a way of teaching that primarily emphasizes storing knowledge. Most of the students recognized this practice and felt that a connection between subject matter and students' personal lives is lacking. With this come a lack of unlearning, self-reflection and awareness of the dynamics of privilege and oppression. This, then, results in a lack of empathy for marginalized groups and a low degree of readiness to take action. There is also no extensive room for emotions in the educational sphere as emotions are, matching the banking system of education, seen as something that is to stay outside of the classroom. Moreover, there is limited attention for intersectionality, positionality and situatedness – crucial concepts in the fight against oppression.

Suggestions for a more elaborate implementation of anti-oppressive education are, amongst others, an extension of the class that already includes the most anti-oppressive components, civics class, and building diversity and inclusion into the curriculum for high school students but perhaps also for younger students. Furthermore, more room for emotions and mental wellbeing and identity formation were discussed. The students also emphasized a need for schools to pay more attention to the practical side of growing up, such as help with learning how to do taxes. This can be seen as anti-oppressive as it contributes to the formation of equal capacities and abilities.

It seems as if these highlighted shortcomings point to a desire for more freedom in education in which education serves a more liberating purpose. This includes moving away from the banking concept of education. Further research is needed to map out what a curriculum change would have to entail and what would be a suitable age for children to start learning about oppression. Further attention is also needed to solve practical problems of design and legislation. However, further research on anti-oppressive education will never reach a final destination: its very core is to stay in motion.

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Appendix A: Interview guide

Personal

a. Do you want to remain anonymous?

b. How old are you?

c. Where do you live?

d. Where did you go to high school?

e. What do you do in everyday life?

General

1. Do you know what anti-oppressive education is? And where did you learn what this means?

2. In general, would you say your school made efforts to implement anti-oppressive education? Can you explain how?

Diversity and inclusion

3. Do you recall active promotion of diversity and inclusion throughout the curriculum at school? Were there lessons, projects, information or awareness raising on antiracism or LGBTQ+ inclusivity?

4. How diverse was the staff at your school? Did all of your teachers have the same skin colour? Do you recall a teacher or another staff member ever explicitly stating that the school values diversity?

Feelings

5. To what extent do you feel that there was room and attention for mutual respect and empathy for people different from you in the classroom or elsewhere in the school environment?

6. To what extent do you feel that there was room for expressing emotions and feelings in the classroom or elsewhere in the school environment?

Privilege, oppression and identity formation

7. Were you taught about or made aware in high school of the structural functioning of privilege and oppression?

8. To what extent do you feel that there was room and attention for identity formation and the

fluidity of identities? (e.g. transgender visibility)

9. To what extent do you feel that there was room and attention for the disruption and challenging of norms/the status quo? Was being ''different'' supported in the classroom and elsewhere in the school environment? Were differences celebrated?

10. To what extent were you taught about or made aware of the structures behind the status quo? (Dominant cultural values becoming normalized as a standard of comparison by which everything and everyone is compared)

Intersectionality, situatedness and positionality

11. Do you know the meaning of the following terms:

- intersectionality

- situatedness

- positionality

12. To what extent do you feel there was room and attention for intersectionality?

13. To what extent do you feel there was room and attention for situatedness?

14. To what extent do you feel there was room and attention for positionality?

Reflection and unlearning

15. To what extent do you feel that the school (environment) motivated dialogue, discussions and critical (self)reflection?

16. To what extent do you feel that there was room at school to work through the crises and feelings of discomfort that come with anti-oppressive education and unlearning?

Appendix B: Informatieblad en toestemmingsformulier (Nederlands)

<u>**Challenging established education**</u>
<u>**Informatieblad**</u>

Beste deelnemer,

Mijn naam is Sarah en ik ben masterstudent Gender Studies aan de Universiteit Utrecht. Je leest dit informatieblad omdat je bent benaderd of hebt aangeboden om deel te nemen aan mijn scriptieonderzoek over *anti-oppressive education*.

Anti-oppressive education verwijst naar verschillende manieren van lesgeven en/of het vormgeven van curricula met als doel het tegengaan van vormen van onderdrukking en het promoten van gelijkheid. Om te voorkomen dat je als deelnemer (onbewust) antwoorden gaat geven waarvan je verwacht dat ik ze graag wil horen, vertel ik niet precies welke vraag ik probeer te beantwoorden in het onderzoek. Ik wil in ieder geval graag van jou persoonlijk horen of en hoe je *anti-oppressive education* bent tegengekomen en hebt ervaren op jouw middelbare school.

Ik wil graag data verzamelen door middel van één op één interview dat naar verwachting ongeveer een uur zal duren. Dit kan wat korter of langer zijn, afhankelijk van hoe ons gesprek verloopt.

Het geven van informatie en het voorleggen van een toestemmingsformulier (informed consent) aan de deelnemer is verplicht.

Onderzoeksprocedure

Zoals gezegd bestaat het onderzoek voor jou als deelnemer uit een enkel interview. Tijdens het interview worden open vragen gesteld door de onderzoeker, waarop de deelnemer wordt gevraagd te antwoorden/hun mening te geven. Van elke interview zal een geluidsopname gemaakt worden. Deze opnames zullen uitsluitend voor analyse worden gebruikt.

Risico's, ongemakken en nadelige gevolgen

Dit onderzoek heeft geen risico's voor de fysieke gezondheid. Wel kunnen sommige van de onderwerpen een gevoelige snaar raken. We gaan het bijvoorbeeld hebben over vormen van onderdrukking, stereotypes en privileges. Uiteraard staat het je vrij om sommige vragen niet te beantwoorden. Jouw gevoel en welzijn staan bij de onderzoeker altijd voorop.

Voorwaarden

Deelname aan het onderzoek is op vrijwillige basis en gaat niet gepaard met verplichtingen. De deelnemer kan op ieder moment, zonder duidelijke opgaaf van redenen, deelname weigeren of afbreken. Dit heeft geen nadelige gevolgen voor de deelnemer.

Anonimiteit

Onderzoeksgegevens worden, als dit de voorkeur heeft, volledig geanonimiseerd en zullen alleen voor het afstudeeronderzoek gebruikt worden. Onderzoeksgegevens zullen nooit aan derden verstrekt worden. De resultaten van dit onderzoek zullen worden aangeboden aan de Universiteit Utrecht. Op aanvraag kunnen de onderzoeksresultaten met de deelnemer gedeeld worden.

Als je nog vragen hebt, kun je contact opnemen met de onderzoeker via e-mail.

Sarah J. Feltmann BA | s.j.feltmann@students.uu.nl

Challenging established education
Toestemmingsformulier om deel te nemen aan onderzoek

· Ik, …………………………………, geef toestemming om aan dit onderzoek deel te nemen.
· Ik begrijp dat, zelfs als ik nu toestemming geef om deel te nemen, ik de optie heb om mij op elk moment terug te trekken of te weigeren bepaalde vragen te beantwoorden. Dit heeft geen consequenties.
· Ik begrijp dat ik mijn toestemming om data van mijn interviews te gebruiken kan terugtrekken binnen twee weken na het interview. Het materiaal zal dan verwijderd worden.
· Ik heb het doel en de aard van het onderzoek uitgelegd gekregen op papier en ik heb de mogelijkheid gehad om vragen te stellen over het onderzoek.
· Ik begrijp dat deelname aan dit onderzoek inhoudt dat ik met de interviewer in gesprek ga over over *anti-oppressive education* op mijn (oude) middelbare school.
· Ik begrijp dat de onderwerpen die besproken worden moeilijk om over te praten of gevoelig kunnen zijn.
· Ik begrijp dat ik geen direct voordeel heb van het deelnemen aan dit onderzoek.
· Ik geef toestemming voor het opnemen van het interview.

· Ik begrijp dat alle informatie die ik deel voor dit onderzoek vertrouwelijk behandeld zal worden.

· Ik begrijp dat ik de mogelijkheid heb om anoniem te blijven in elk schriftelijk document over dit onderzoek. Dit zal gebeuren door het veranderen van de naam en het verbergen van details die de eigen identiteit of de identiteit van mensen die ter sprake komen zouden kunnen weggeven.

· Ik begrijp dat (anonieme) uittreksels uit de interviews misschien geciteerd kunnen worden in de Masterscriptie van de onderzoeker.

· Ik begrijp dat de onderzoeker naar de relevante autoriteiten zal moeten stappen als ik deel dat ik of iemand anders gevaar loopt. De onderzoeker zal dit eerst met mij bespreken maar is misschien verplicht om melding te doen zonder mijn toestemming.

· Ik begrijp dat de ondertekende toestemmingsformulieren en de originele audiobestanden bewaard zullen worden op de persoonlijke computer van de onderzoeker tot het eind van 2021.

· Ik begrijp dat de transcripts van mijn interviews (waarin alle informatie die de identiteit zou kunnen weggeven verwijderd is) bewaard zullen worden tot het eind van 2021.

· Ik begrijp dat ik door de vrijheid op informatie het recht heb om de informatie die ik gedeeld heb op elk moment in te zien terwijl het in bewaring is.

· Ik begrijp dat ik vrij ben om contact te zoeken met eenieder die bij dit onderzoek betrokken is om meer uitleg of informatie te verkrijgen.

Onderzoeker: Sarah J. Feltmann BA | s.j.feltmann@students.uu.nl
Universitaire begeleider: Dr. Christine Quinan | c.l.quinan@uu.nl

Handtekening deelnemer

Datum:

Handtekening onderzoeker
Ik geloof dat de deelnemer geïnformeerde toestemming geeft om deel te nemen

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Datum:

Appendix C: Interview call used on Instagram

OPROEP

Voor mijn master in Gender Studies doe ik onderzoek naar anti-oppressive education in het middelbaar onderwijs in Nederland. Hierbij gaat het om verschillende manieren van lesgeven en/of het vormgeven van curricula met als doel het tegengaan van vormen van onderdrukking en het promoten van gelijkheid.

Ik ben hiervoor op zoek naar een aantal (ex-)scholieren/studenten die met mij in gesprek willen over dit onderwerp en hun ervaringen op de middelbare school met mij willen delen. Ik ben op zoek naar jongeren die nu eindexamen doen in havo of vwo óf die vorig schooljaar, in 2020, hun havo- of vwo-diploma hebben gehaald (16-20 jaar).

Als je weinig of geen kennis hebt over dit onderwerp ben je zeer welkom: juist naar jouw ervaringen ben ik benieuwd. Maar: als je affiniteit hebt met Gender Studies, bijvoorbeeld omdat je je bezighoudt met feminisme of politiek activisme, omdat je onderdeel bent van de LGBTQ+ community of om een andere reden, zou ik jou ook graag willen interviewen.

Ben of ken jij iemand die zich door mij zou willen laten interviewen? Stuur dan alsjeblieft een PB of mailtje naar sarahfeltmann@gmail.com. Heb je twijfels of vragen? Neem dan ook gerust contact op. Dankjewel!

Appendix D: Jenaplan education

My conversation with Otis provoked me to find out more about Jenaplan education because it seemed to me as if some of the core principles of this type of education fit seamlessly with anti-oppressive education. I went to a Jenaplan primary school myself, but only now that I am reading more about it do I see that some of the common practices at that primary school were probably not common practice at non-Jenaplan schools, such as the emphasis on party and celebration (there were week-opening celebrations, week-closing celebrations and frequent morning circles). On the website of the Dutch Jenaplan Association, we can read the following (freely translated):

> "Learning arises from love, from connection and from wonder. The school is a living and working community in which we learn how to live together. Parents, as well as the school, raise children to become people with value for themselves, for others and for a sustainable world." (Nederlandse Jenaplan Vereniging, 2021)

Otis' experiences at his high school are testimony to this description of Jenaplan. His reality serves as proof that his school was, indeed, a living and working community that fosters learning from love. This shows from the personal connection Otis described, which allows students to connect subject matter to their own lives, and which creates a safe and welcoming space for all students. Jenaplan education comes from and is common practice in Germany. In The Netherlands, too, there are quite some Jenaplan primary schools. Because Jenaplan education is widespread in Dutch primary education, and also on the rise in high school education, it is fruitful to briefly discuss here some of the ways in which Jenaplan education matches with anti-oppressive education. Jenaplan education works from a set of basic principles, among which are the following (Nederlandse Jenaplan Vereniging, n.d.):

1. Each person is unique. Therefore, every child and every adult has an irreplaceable value.
This principle highlights an appreciation for uniqueness, diversity and inclusivity, which could be said to be the very core of anti-oppressive education, as AOE is working against the inequalities and exclusion that come from a disrespect for differences.

2. Each person has the right to develop a personal identity. Important aspects of

identity are: independence, critical consciousness, creativity and an emphasis on social justice. In this, race, nationality, gender, sexuality, social environment, religion, worldview and disabilities should not make a difference.

Identity markers that privilege and oppression are based upon are mentioned here and it is emphasised that they should not matter (i.e. not that we should not *see* them - simply that they do not mean people are unequal).

3. In order to develop a personal identity, each person requires personal relationships with other people, with the sensory reality of nature and culture, and with the non-sensory reality.

In this principle, I recognize not only well-deserved attention for connecting with other people, but also *acknowledgement of a non-sensory reality.* In this sense, Jenaplan education (at least in their principles, which, like with anti-oppressive education, does not necessarily say something about the implementation) acknowledges each person's mental health, feelings and emotions. It also acknowledges that our sensory reality, which is often seen as objective, can be different to each and is always interacting with the non-sensory reality.

4. Each person is acknowledged as a person *in their entirety* and is approached and addressed in this manner whenever possible.

In anti-oppressive education, it is important that we acknowledge all the layers of identity and the effects these identity markers have on everyday experiences, and do not look away when things get uncomfortable.

5. Each person is acknowledged as a carrier of culture as well as a cultural agent and is approached and addressed in this manner wherever possible.

This principle recognizes the major impact that culture and accompanying dominant values have on us, but it also acknowledges that we are the very shapers of culture: culture is fluid and ever-changing.

6. The school is an autonomous, cooperative organisation of involved parties. She is influenced by society, and influences society.

The interaction between institutions like schools and society is emphasized here. It justifies the implementation of anti-oppressive education: the school is not separate from society and needs to acknowledge its part in upholding (or disrupting) certain norms and therefore

shaping society. As stated above, in order to fight oppression, schools must look at their own complicity with it (Kumashiro 2000, 25-36).

7. The school predominantly places children together in a heterogeneous manner, in order to stimulate learning from and caring for each other.

This contributes to disrupting a child's sense of normalcy because living and working together with a heterogeneous group of people creates another, more accurate idea on what society is like. Moreover, it contributes to celebrating differences and is a good preparation for living in a diverse and multicultural society as an adult.

8. In the school, behaviour and performance review are executed while taking into consideration as much as possible each child's personal developmental history, and it is done as much as possible in dialogue with the child.

This principle takes into account a person's uniqueness and entirety. The principle acknowledges that you cannot look at and judge everyone in the same way. The principle fits with the concepts of intersectionality, situatedness and positionality because a person's subjectively shaped location is taken into account. Moreover, the importance of dialogue fits with anti-oppressive education. As Freire emphasized in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*: "Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education" (Freire 1970, 65-66).

9. In the school, change and improvement are seen as a never-ending process. This process is managed by a consistent interaction between acting and thinking.

It is acknowledged that change is always happening, and that society is not static - an anti-oppressive base point: we are ever-changing.

The principles fit with anti-oppressive education because they exceed the banking method of education. They exceed the idea that children come to school to store knowledge and be prepared (in a one-size-fits-all manner) for working life in a capitalist society that monetizes everything. Jenaplan education, as well as anti-oppressive education, acknowledge the overarching importance of growing up to become who you really are, and the freedom (from oppression) that is needed to do this.