

Negotiating the Progressive Paradox: Middle-Class Parents in Majority–Minority Primary Schools in Amsterdam

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Abstract

Across Western Europe, progressive issues take centre stage within integration debates and discourse. This article addresses the paradox middle-class progressives get caught up in when arguing for openness towards diversity, while also expecting adaptation to the progressive “modern” norm on sexuality, especially from Muslim Others. Going beyond existing literature, this article demonstrates the understudied manifestations of this paradox in everyday life, within a diverse majority–minority primary school context in Amsterdam. Taking sex education as a case, the authors reveal three different approaches—confrontational, continued discussion, and compromise—with which middle-class parents without a migration background negotiate difference, each emphasizing different aspects of the paradox. The results show how, despite being a local numerical minority, progressive parents still enact their power position at large arguing for (gradual) adaptation to “modernity.” However, some parents provide solutions to difference that move away from consensus and envision a future that allows for multiple norms to exist.

Keywords

integration; majority–minority; sex education; time politics

1. Introduction

In Western European societies, sexuality features prominently in public debates and discourses on integration. With the Netherlands portrayed as an especially liberal country on issues of sexuality, citizens are expected to embrace progressive, liberal norms and values—especially regarding gender equality and sexual liberation (Mepschen et al., 2010). These progressive norms and values are considered to be the core of Dutch liberal society. Conformity to these norms is expected from all citizens, but particularly from

people with migration backgrounds, and specifically Muslims, who are deemed to deviate from these liberal norms on sexuality (Duyvendak et al., 2016). They are depicted as “backwards” and in need of modernizing. This aspect of the integration discourse, which is thus entangled with progressive expectations, does not only operate on the public or political level, but can permeate people’s practices, emotions, experiences, and can significantly impact interactions in everyday life (Mepschen, 2016). Yet, how the importance of commonly held progressive norms on sexuality in Dutch society exactly plays out in everyday diverse contexts is far less analysed.

This article focuses on the narratives of progressive, liberal middle-class parents without migration background within the everyday context of ethnically diverse primary schools in Amsterdam. Amsterdam was the first of three large Dutch cities to transition into a so-called majority–minority city: a context in which people without migration background now form an ethnic numerical minority (Crul, 2016). Further, this demographic reality characterizes an urban environment in which an increased differentiation exists between ethnic groups, but also within these groups.

Against the backdrop of this city context, we specifically focused on middle-class parents residing in Amsterdam who, additionally, opted for a majority–minority primary school for their children. In the Netherlands, there is to a large extent a free school choice, which in practice means that people without a migration background can avoid schools with a large percentage of children with a migration background (Foli & Boterman, 2022). However, in the last decade, there has been a growing group of parents without migration background who have deliberately chosen a diverse majority–minority school for their child(ren), because they believe that their child(ren) should learn to live with each other (Boterman, 2013).

This local majority–minority school context thus puts parents without migration background who embrace the progressive norm, and who are open towards diversity, in an actual everyday setting in which they are now one of the numerical minorities. As such, progressive middle-class parents find themselves in situations in which they are no longer self-evidently the norm. In this article, we empirically demonstrate how these parents respond to this situation, and how they perceive and negotiate differences regarding norms on sexuality, by exploring their narratives regarding sex education in primary schools. Using sex education as a case, this article aims to answer the following research question:

How do progressive middle-class parents without migration backgrounds deal with perceived differences relating to progressive norms in a majority–minority primary school setting?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. *The Dutch Context: Progressive Modern Consensus and the Backward Other*

In the Netherlands, ideas about progressive values such as secularism, gender equality, and sexual freedom have become widely shared after the transformations of the 1960s, when large segments of the population rapidly distanced themselves, within only one generation, from Christian norms and values and “moral traditionalism” (Mepschen et al., 2010; Van der Veer, 2006). Whereas in the United States, for instance, opinions about progressive issues are sharply divided among its citizens, the Dutch population today seems in high agreement on progressive ideals, especially regarding gender equality and sexuality. The percentage

of Dutch who seem to support gay rights and propositions such as “homosexuality is normal” is among the highest in the world (Gerhards, 2010). The majority of the population rejects propositions such as “women have to have children to be happy” and “a child should respect its parents.” However, such a growing “progressive consensus” should not be misconstrued with the idea that there is no diversity at all in this respect, also among the Dutch without migration background. The Bible Belt for example, a large religious Christian group, holds conservative ideas around sexuality. This idea of a consensus on progressive liberal norms regarding sexuality seems most prominent among the Dutch middle class in large cities, especially in the progressive city of Amsterdam (Foner et al., 2014). But what the overall formation of a “progressive consensus” among the middle class primarily indicates is that progressiveness has become a pillar of the Dutch secular, liberal, respectable, modern, and Enlightened self-image (Bartelink & Wiering, 2020; Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009), and the norm to which all Dutch citizens are expected to adhere. This includes the middle-class expectation that all people should be able to talk openly, freely, and publicly about sexuality, without shame or blushing (Van den Berg, 2013; Wiering, 2020).

While consensus on sexuality is thus expected from all Dutch citizens, certain groups are especially singled out to conform as they are perceived to be stuck in traditional family, authoritarian, and religious values. This includes Christian groups, but also—and most often—Muslims who are deemed sexually “backwards” and deviating from the Dutch modern moral standard (Butler, 2008; Ghorashi, 2003; Uitermark et al., 2014; Wekker, 2016; Wiering, 2020).

The notion that Muslims, most often people with a Moroccan and Turkish migration background, are in need of modernizing has become dominant in Dutch integration discourse, especially within the political right circles, but it can also be found among the progressive left (although in lighter and more subtle forms; Duyvendak et al., 2016; Uitermark et al., 2014). Such discourse is based on an essentialized understanding of “cultures” (“migrant culture” versus “Dutch modern culture”) as homogeneous wholes of static, fixed, cultural norms and values (Van den Berg & Schinkel, 2009), dismissing differences within these “cultures” and the possibility that one can be Muslim and support a progressive position on sexuality-related issues (Bartelink & Knibbe, 2022). In addition, this dominant integration discourse carries the self-evident expectation that the “backward Other” should adapt to the “modern” progressive standard (Duyvendak et al., 2016). Not only must they conform to these norms, but they are also expected to internalize the progressive consensus, in emotional terms, as their own moral principles. Hence, this “consensual dismissal” of a different set of norms and practices (Slootman & Duyvendak, 2015, p. 150) leaves little space for difference and the negotiation thereof.

Despite its dominance, the entanglement of progressive issues within the integration discourse puts particularly middle-class progressives, liberals, and anti-racists in a rather difficult stretch: They feel they can only fully show their commitment to progressive values by distancing themselves from Muslims’ alleged conservatism, thereby running the risk to partake in exclusionary culturalist rhetoric (Mepschen et al., 2010). The crucial issue here is that part of the “open” liberal ideology, which these progressive people support, is of course that it allows for differences and does not impose an all-encompassing norm. In other words, progressive people are caught in their own paradox when they emphatically argue that all should adapt to progressive liberal norms on sexuality, while they also advocate that we all should accept diversity. However, Duyvendak (2021, p. 4215) argues that, because progressive norms are part of the Dutch liberal self-image that is considered to be at stake, it can fuel “illiberal” positions on issues of accepting diversity. Such positions can, as mentioned, manifest in distinctions made between those who have “arrived in modernity”

by embracing and embodying progressiveness and those who are “lagging behind” somewhere in the past (Van den Berg, 2016).

2.2. Power and “Arriving in Modernity”

The question of “who has arrived in modernity and who has not?” is infused with temporal logic (Butler, 2008, p. 1). Various studies have explored temporal logic (i.e., “uses of the past”) in contemporary integration discourse and narratives among people without a migration background (Bertossi et al., 2021; Mepschen et al., 2010). These studies focus, for instance, on the way *evaluations* of the present are translated into a time sequence to give meaning to that present. With such translations, “realities are referred back, away from the present,” even though those situations actually exist in the present (Mills, 1969). These temporal evaluations come into being, for example, when perceived differences are expressed in terms of “distance in time” (Fabian, 2014). Such temporal distance is then interpreted as “unequal progress” between those who are stuck in the past and those already in modernity (Fabian, 2014).

Framing progressive “modern” issues as unequal temporal progress is not without consequences as it produces a clear hierarchy. In Butler’s view, it is therefore not “cultural difference” that is the problem here, but rather how “hegemonic perceptions of progress define themselves over and against a pre-modern temporality, that they produce for the purpose of their own self-legitimation” (Butler, 2008, p. 1). An important implication is thus that temporal framing can not only function as an *evaluation* of the present, but it can also function as an instrument of *legitimation* and power (Bertossi et al., 2021; Fabian, 2014; Lamont & Thévenot, 2000). Therefore, our aim is to unravel how this temporal logic is enacted in the negotiation of differences and progressive narratives on sexuality.

3. Case: Sex Education in Dutch Primary Schools

This study explores how parents deal with difference in relation to the topic of sexuality by focusing on the case of sex education. Often taken as an example of progressive sex education (Lewis & Knijn, 2002), Dutch primary schools are, since 2012, legally obliged to provide sex education. One of the Dutch government’s target goals is to teach children to “respectfully deal with sexuality and diversity within society, including sexual diversity” (Inspectie van Onderwijs, 2016). As for the overall curriculum, the selection of educational materials and methods employed is largely up to the schools and teachers to decide. This includes the decision of whether schools want to provide education throughout the school year or, as many schools in Amsterdam do, during the national week of *Lentekriebels* (spring jitters) created for this purpose. Various education kits have been developed by government institutions and beyond to aid schools in shaping their sex education programme.

While the content of sex education may vary between schools, age groups, and teachers, two programmes will be briefly introduced here since these were most referred to by parents in this study. First is the sex education programme of Rutgers, which is the leading developer of sex education methods in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, almost half of all primary schools use this programme (Megens et al., 2023). For the last two years of primary school, targeting the age group of 10–12 (the main focus of this study), the programme covers topics such as nudity, the body, relationships, sexual activity, masturbation, reproduction, sexual desire and boundaries, sexual orientation, media, and birth control.

Second is the television show *Dokter Corrie*, which covers similar topics and can be used as a pedagogical tool for sex education in primary school. *Dokter Corrie* features an actress and comedian who portrays the role of a clumsy general practitioner, who educates children about sexuality in a humorous way by using explicit language and visuals (Wiering, 2020). This includes, for instance, inviting Dutch public figures to the show to share personal experiences related to sexuality and showcasing actual naked bodies.

Critical scholars have underlined the normative emphasis on “open speech,” promoting sexuality as a normal, shameless, topic of public conversation in these programmes (Wiering, 2020) and in Dutch sex education in general (Bartelink & Wiering, 2020; Van den Berg, 2013). In this article, however, we do not examine sex education programmes themselves, but rather use sex education as a case to demonstrate how middle-class parents without migration background perceive and negotiate difference around progressive issues that particularly matter to them. Importantly, sex education was not the initial focus of this study but emerged as an important theme, as will be further outlined in the next section.

4. Method

4.1. Sample

This research draws on nineteen qualitative interviews conducted between February and December 2021. The interviews were part of a collaborative project of the Verwey Jonker Institute and the *Becoming a Minority* project, bringing together expertise on parenting and dynamics within a majority–minority setting. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, almost all interviews took place online via Zoom, except for two interviews that were conducted in a local cafe chosen by the participants. As mentioned, the participants included middle-class parents *without migration background*: people who were born in the country and whose both parents were born in the country. Of the parents interviewed, 18 identified as female and one identified as male. All parents moved into a majority–minority neighbourhood in Amsterdam West/New West—most of them more than 10 years ago—due to family expansion and to buy affordable housing. More importantly, these parents chose a majority–minority primary school for one or more of their children. The ages of the children of the parents included in the study ranged from 7–13, but most children were in the last two years of primary school (age 10+). As an exception, we also included parents with children who just finished primary school. The focus on parents with children in these last two years of primary school is noteworthy because sex education particularly appears to emerge as a topic during this period. This is likely due to the content covered and the increased attention dedicated to sex education by primary schools during these years.

4.2. School Selection and Recruitment

This article involves parents who were recruited via various majority–minority primary schools (for reasons of anonymity not mentioned). We predominantly recruited parents from three majority–minority schools, two of which had those without a migration background forming a clear numerical minority, and one school that almost reached a mixed (50/50 estimate) composition. Since the exact numbers of children with and without migration background in schools are for privacy reasons not publicly available, we based the ethnic composition of the schools on (prior) fieldwork observations by the first author and other project members. Additionally, during the interviews, parents were asked about their perceived school composition, which

confirmed our majority–minority criteria. For some parents, this composition meant, for instance, that in a class of 24 children, their child was one of the five children without migration background.

As for the recruitment process, we initially employed purposive sampling when we utilized our social and professional network to navigate the constraints imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Through the collaboration with the parenting foundation Stichting Wie Ben Jij Film, a stakeholder of the Vrije Universiteit, we got into contact with the majority of our participants. Additionally, we used the snowball technique to find other parents who met our criteria.

4.3. Interviews and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author and took between one to two and a half hours. Given our aim to study the negotiation of difference in a majority–minority primary school setting more broadly, our questionnaire covered the following topics: school choice, connections among parents, and challenges and opportunities of a majority–minority school environment.

For the analysis, all verbatim transcribed interviews were coded using the qualitative analysis software program Atlas.ti. Before putting the transcripts into the software program, they were first carefully reread to gain a sense of the data. During this phase, the issue of sex education, along with related topics such as showering with or without underwear after gym, was identified as a contested issue for the parents in this study. In the second phase, the narratives relating to sex education were coded to gain a better understanding of the subject matter. In this process, attention was paid both to what the participants said and how they said it. This process allowed us to discover three different reactions to difference in relation to sex education among middle-class parents, and to recognize how temporal logic infused these reactions. In the last phase, we re-organized some of the codes under the three reactions/approaches and elevated the codes and themes to a more abstract level by going back and forth between the material and relevant theoretical concepts in the literature.

5. “We Live in Other Worlds and Other Times”

The issue of sex education stood out for many middle-class parents. During the interviews, parents would often indicate some sort of turning point in their experience of difference within the majority–minority school setting. Sex education was an issue whereby living with difference, which was generally positively framed, became particularly challenging and was problematized rather than valued. For some, the issue of sex education “went beyond their boundaries of living together nicely.” For others, it was the first moment they felt “out of place”:

I had never experienced an unpleasant feeling with other parents before. But at one point, the week of the *Lentekriebels* [sex education], which is every year, well when you talk about “when do you not feel at home?” Then I believe, yes, that moment has now arrived. (Laurinde)

Relevant to understand in this case is the great importance placed on sex education by middle-class parents without migration background, labelling it a core responsibility of the school. One of the most recurring phrases about sex education at school was: “It cannot be explicit enough for me” (Sandra). Such an explicit programme,

parents explained, aligns with their own (“exceptionally”) progressive household: a space where sexuality is discussed openly, directly, and freely (Van den Berg, 2013), to the point of questioning whether “prudishness still has a function in Dutch society.” Several parents, for instance, referred to conversations they would have at home, about their support for free bodily expression, nudity, or their dating expectations (explaining that their child can bring home whomever they fall in love with). Other parents cited television shows they support and watch together, such as *Dokter Corrie* in which people share personal experiences related to sexuality. Our point here is that parents connected their progressive ideas and education at home with their pronounced support for an explicit programme of sex education at school—which should involve an open discussion about sex, sexual development, and sexual diversity:

We are very open about this theme [sex education] at home; everything can be talked about. So, I do advocate for it to be provided in an explicit way by really knowledgeable people who are trained for that, because they see everything on the internet....I also think you should discuss all forms of love [sexual diversity] and sex with each other. But I am also very explicit myself. So I don't know if you know *Dokter Corrie* [comic TV show on sex education], that's very explicit. I think we could also watch *Corrie* in class with everyone. (Joyce)

The strong connection some people place between sex education in their private homes and the semi-public place of school is important in understanding the reactions of some of the parents without migration background. It is expected that schools also adhere to their progressive standard on sexuality. Whereas explicit professional sex education at school was seen by parents as an important way of transferring their progressive norms to their children, this very mission was also considered compromised or at risk due to the schools' diversity. From our participants' perspective, especially parents of Turkish and Moroccan descent, and parents who practice Islam, were deemed to have different norms on sexuality. They would not support an explicit sex education programme at school but rather see it as a private matter:

The concern of these parents [is that] “then they are going to say that it can be nice also for children to touch certain body parts.” And...Muslim parents were like: “Yes, I don't want *that* to be told to my children in the classroom.” They say: “We do it, but we want to do that ourselves at home and we want to decide how.” They don't think it belongs in school. (Kim)

Some middle-class parents mentioned how a very explicit form of sex education at their school would cause a “large group” of mothers with migration backgrounds to protest in the schoolyard against sex education while keeping their children at home during the week of *Lentekriebels*. These perceived divergent positions on sex education, as another parent argues, have regrettably produced *distance* between her and these mothers:

The way you deal with men and women, that sort of thing, is sometimes a bit of a problem. The school wants to provide education about this, about sex and sexual development...but there are Moroccan mothers who are very articulate, which is actually a good thing, who said, “we won't put up with this and you have to respect us and we want to do it ourselves.” Next to the Dutch parents who were actually kind of educating, like, “no, it's actually very good that this is happening because they see everything online and they have to figure it out for themselves”....This has led to a distance, in values, that for the first time I also felt like, well, this is actually something I don't want to give in on. And that's difficult, we've noticed that now. (Fenna)

The quote illustrates how middle-class parents without a migration background often articulated the perceived difference as “distance in norms and values” (Scholten, 2011). In this constructed dichotomy, parents positioned themselves as the Dutch progressive, secular, modern, advocates of sex education, sometimes in direct opposition to the “non-modern” opposers of sex education—parents of Turkish and Moroccan descent, and in particular Muslims (see also Van den Berg, 2016; Wiering, 2020, p. 70). The narratives thus reveal how parents without migration background often employ an essentialist approach in which ethnicity and religion are seen as decisive characteristics for the views and actions of certain parents, disregarding differences within groups. Of particular relevance to our argument here is that in this othering structure, we found an equation of perceived *distance in norms* with a perceived *distance in time* (Fabian, 2014):

[During sex education], I thought we had gone back a hundred years in time and suddenly you found yourself in “us” and “them” again. While we had been trying to connect for all those years, it worked remarkably polarizing. (Laurinde)

We live in other worlds, and in my experience, also in other times....The way this [sex education] is taught fits in our modern society: open and bare. In the past there was a taboo on sexuality and everything happened in secrecy, with many early-age pregnancies as a result. After everything we have fought for as women, I do not want to go back to a situation in which we have to feel shame in talking about sex. Is this the future we want to give our kids with a different sexual preference? No, this is back to the benevolence of the 50s. And that runs counter to how I stand in life as a non-religious, green, and free woman. (Tamara)

This reasoning of “distance in time” invoked above was by no means exceptional. Although most often not as strongly expressed as Tamara did, this temporal logic came up in the narratives of many middle-class parents. As the Other is perceived to be lagging behind in the past, middle-class parents can feel they now too find themselves “back a hundred years in time.” Like others, Tamara more specifically refers to the pre-modern 1950s period here (before the Dutch sexual revolution) and a “we” who ostensibly moved beyond gender inequality and sexual oppression, and “they” who are not part of this “historical triumph,” and have yet to arrive in the modern present (e.g., Van den Berg, 2016; Van der Veer, 2006). This temporal logic, which manifests in societal discourse at large, thus comes into being in the way parents evaluate situations in everyday life. As middle-class parents associated the different positions on sex education with the Other in their majority–minority school, the very past they felt liberated from came back to them in the present through the school of their child(ren).

6. Three Approaches of Dealing with the Paradox

For middle-class parents, this association of difference as distance in time (Fabian, 2014), and therefore an unexpected journey back in time, brought out a paradox within their own progressive liberal thinking: How do they go about living together in daily life in the “modern” present (and possibly the future) when they position the Other, who they have chosen to live together with, in the past? We found three different approaches to this paradox that have temporality, allowing space for different norms on sexuality, and differentiating between private and semi-public or not, as the core organizing principles. We want to emphasize that the three positions are of course ideal types as some parents changed position or fit somewhere between two positions. What

our middle-class parents shared is that they embraced a progressive norm on sexuality. The difference we found between parents rather lies in how they negotiate (or not) such a position in a context of difference around this topic.

Some parents without a migration background took the approach of protecting “their modern” norm. They distanced themselves from certain parents while making generalizations of a whole ethnic and/or religious group. Others did not want this to cause a breaking point between parents in school. They instead used a temporal argument to continue the discussion on the topic among parents, hoping to convince the Other, in a more subtle way, to move closer to “their progressive modern” norm on sexuality over time. Finally, there were those who felt that the connection they had built together as parents was more important. Here the possibility of not having explicit sex education in school was regretted but was to some extent compensated, as a solution, by having an explicit discussion on the topic at home.

Below we show the three different narratives and subsequent approaches in detail. We have labelled them the confrontational approach, continued discussion approach, and compromise approach. These three approaches thus vary in the expectation of the Other, as well as the space they allow for the negotiation of difference.

6.1. Confrontational Approach

For a few middle-class parents, the very notion of going back in time resulted in a strong resistance and protection of freedom to express and transfer their progressive “modern” norms. Norms they felt they were about to lose or had already lost. Among them was Tamara, who articulated such a “discourse of cultural loss” (Mepschen, 2016) when she explained how, feeling “pressured” by some “Muslim parents,” the school had decided, among other things, to no longer watch *Dokter Corrie* in class. This children’s TV show, which to her depicts sexual freedom, is now “taken away from [them].” While becoming emotional talking about this, Tamara explained how this perceived wrongfulness relates to her minority position in school, as “those who are among the majority and scream the loudest will eventually get their way.” To protect her progressive standard, she decided to “fight back” by confronting the school principal:

I indeed talked to the principal about this [*Dokter Corrie*], so I’m making work of this. So that she [child] knows...she sees her mother fight back. That I am not going to let them push me around. That I stand up for my own rights...I mean I think it is too ridiculous that the teacher cannot educate it [sex education] as she already has been doing it for six years, by using educative tools facilitated by the Dutch government. Lessons should be given in freedom, without the interference of certain groups of parents who label facets of sexuality as dirty. (Tamara)

The quote shows how some parents felt entitled to protect “their” “modern” norm, which they believe all people should aspire to. This approach echoes that of Laurine, who also turned to the school principal:

Mainly, I wanted to address the disturbance the whole thing caused. Even when I’m thinking about it, I get angry....They are a hundred years back in time, and yet, in my view, their views were listened to too much. While we are here in the Netherlands and this is a public school. I believe they compromised, but compromises are never strong. However, if I’m right, we will have sex education

again next year. So, I am already bracing myself. But you know, at a certain moment you also think: I'll just ride it out. They're about to go to secondary school...there they will hopefully be more among like-minded people. (Laurinde)

The underlying logic is that because “they” are stuck in the past, their voices have less value in the present and should therefore not be listened to too much. This exemplifies Butler’s (2008) argument of how a logic of unequal temporal process produces a clear hierarchy, which can legitimize the idea that the Other should adapt to “their” “modern” norm (Van den Berg, 2016). Consequently, this logic can also function as a legitimization for their concrete actions aimed at preserving their norm, by actively seeking intervention from the school principal. This demonstrates that parents who adopt this approach leave no room for difference. Instead, they treat difference regarding sexuality as a non-negotiable subject. This approach does not only impact the connection with certain parents in the present (to the point of not speaking to them); as the narrative of Laurinde shows, some parents also saw little space for the Other anymore in their future.

6.2. Continued Discussion Approach

In contrast to the above, other parents without migration background did not consider the enforcement of the progressive norm a suitable solution to the perceived differences, as it would only increase the very distance they wish to restore. Rather than “pushing through” an explicit version of sex education, some parents employed a more gradual approach. Rob, for example, explained how parents of Turkish and Moroccan descent who, in his view, do not yet conform to the “progressive modern norm” on sexuality, should be allowed some time to catch up in time:

Sex education, I'm all in, or discussing homosexuality, all in, but I feel like they're really trying to push it through. In the 50s and 60s it may have helped to press these freedoms onto Catholics and Protestants. But I know you can't do that with Turks and Moroccans. They're going to rebel, they're going to an Islamic school. So, I allow them their own development process. Now when you start talking to these ladies, very different from what many Dutch parents think, they say: Sexual education is very important, I used to get it at school. But you have to do it gradually, I say. You know, they come from their culture, their grandparents often still lived in houses without windows in them. And we already have 300 years of enlightenment behind us, so we have to allow them time. (Rob)

Rob’s narrative illustrates how some parents were aware of the risk of essentializing difference by ascribing fixed characteristics to an entire group. Yet he gets caught up in it when, through a temporal logic of unequal progress (Fabian, 2014), parents with a migration background were granted some time for “gradual adaptation.” Instead of confrontation, a continuous “discussion,” “conversation,” or “dialogue” about the perceived differences (Van den Berg, 2013) was seen as the solution to, implicitly, bring about this adaptation over time. This approach is also illustrated by Hanna when she promotes continuous conversation as a way of actually addressing and shaping underlying beliefs and norms regarding sexuality:

You must continue [to] engage in conversation, I think that's the only thing you can do, to find the entrances with people. There are always stories behind people as well, I think that's what you have to find out. And I do understand the emotion sometimes that comes with that. But I also think what we all have to do is to address the structures behind it. Still say, yes listen, if your daughter at ten suddenly

gets her period, it suddenly bleeds, how was that for you? Don't you want it to be different for your daughter? (Hanna)

Notwithstanding parents' good intentions, the approach of "continued discussion" may possibly foster more understanding of differences, but it does not create much room for actual negotiation of differences. The idea of a single progressive norm on sexuality remains unchallenged.

6.3. *Compromise Approach*

Similar to the continued discussion approach above, parents in this third approach also aimed to restore the perceived distance with parents, yet in a different way. Not confronting or subtly "educating" the Other, but rather seeking compromise would bridge the perceived distance between the parents. Fenna brings in an interesting narrative to further elaborate on this approach. While she recognized her initial tendency to defend her "modern" norm on sex education, she was also aware of the superior position of power she would then take on:

Sometimes I think, some parents are just so traditional, and that's just 100 years ago by Dutch standards. But am I within my rights to say: No, you adapt, we're just talking about sex and menstruation in class, or am I then ignoring these cultural differences? And do I actually act superior? I certainly do in this case. You know, I do want to continue with them, but do I want to abolish my own values for that, no. So how are we going to do that? In the end, I realized, I want to continue together. So it is also to my benefit that we find a solution. My child can also get the education at home. It's not that if you compromise at one point, women emancipation as a whole will be overthrown. (Fenna)

To continue together, Fenna realized, means accepting difference and allowing space for compromise in the semi-public space, without taking oneself as the norm. Although some form of sex education in primary school is legally required, Fenna, as well as a few other parents, named additional explicit education at home as a solution to allow this space for difference in school. Fenna eventually went as far as to sign a petition to support such a less explicit education programme. By choosing to compromise, parents thus prioritized "friendships and warm connections" they had built up with some parents with a migration background over the years. Unlike the other approaches, it seems this approach created the most opportunity for parents to envision and pursue a shared future together *with* difference.

7. Conclusion and Discussion

We discussed in this article the negotiation by progressive, liberal, middle-class parents of the paradox of being open to differences while expecting that the Muslim Other, in particular, should adhere to their progressive "modern" consensus on sexuality (Mepschen et al., 2010; Uitermark et al., 2014). We have looked at this paradox through the case of sex education in a majority-minority primary school context and demonstrated how progressive parents perceive and respond to a situation of difference. How do they deal with these perceived differences? In the reasoning of some of the progressive middle-class parents, we see that defending progressive liberal norms on this topic comes with overtones of positioning certain groups of parents with a migration background, and particularly Muslims, as sexually "backward" and threatening their core beliefs and norms on this topic. It is one of the topics in which perceived difference was most reified and problematized rather than valued.

We found three ideal types of reactions to the paradox in which parents emphasize different aspects of the paradox. First, some parents gave priority to “their” progressive norms on sexuality even when this meant a breaking point with the Other and giving up the principle of respecting differences. Second, other parents especially used the argument of time to more implicitly advocate for small steps in the direction of the progressive norm. Third, some parents eventually gave priority to accepting differences and, perhaps even more importantly, gave priority to the relationships they have built with parents they did not agree with. They used the alternative route of giving explicit sex education at home and not in the semi-public space of school.

The three positions all give an interesting take on how and to what extent people without a migration background allow space for negotiating difference. The different positions have large consequences for if and how people can live together. The first position will most likely result in enduring conflict, estrangement, and potentially the exit from the majority–minority school. In the second position, people want to stay in conversation with the Other but the outcomes are rather unclear since implicit expectations are that the Other will slowly move towards “their own” progressive stance. In the third position, the solution is found in compromise, offering a more sustainable perspective for living together with differences.

With these positions, we deepen our understanding of how middle-class people without a migration background negotiate difference (or refrain from doing so) within a majority–minority context (Crul, 2016). We found that despite being a local numerical minority, many middle-class progressives still assert their power position in society at large by taking themselves as the “modern” norm. This article has shown different ways in which temporal reasoning is intertwined with this enactment. It functions as an instrument of power, as it is used to justify the expectation of the Other to adapt—now or more gradually in time—to the “progressive modern standard” (Butler, 2008; Van den Berg, 2016).

At the same time, this notion of consensus on progressive norms in the Netherlands (Duyvendak et al., 2016) does not play out similarly in a local majority–minority school context. This situation causes some progressive parents without migration background, perhaps for the first time, to actually feel like a numerical minority and, to a certain extent, also powerless to fully force the outcome to their own way. At least not without jeopardizing their decision and commitment to live together. Truly committing to live together with difference then ultimately means moving away from consensus, and without essentializing difference, coming to an agreement that allows multiple norms to exist.

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Conflict of Interests

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