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Peer education on sexual diversity in Dutch secondary education: Peer educators' perceptions of activities and perceived outcomes

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ABSTRACT

Process evaluations of peer education on the topic of sexuality and relationships pay little attention to the activities implemented by peer educators. Process evaluation with other target groups indicate clusters of activities that refer to educator skills, offering a safe place to learn, and efforts to change attitudes. An overarching factor named life experiences influences how peer educators implement activities. In this study, a peer education for social acceptance of LGBT was created and implemented in pre-vocational secondary schools. Students trained as peer educators implemented peer education, and after the implementation, they were interviewed about their activities. Sharing the coming-out story appeared to play a central role in the peer education intervention and its perceived outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Intervention; interviews; LGBT; peer education; secondary schools

Introduction

In the Netherlands, primary and secondary schools are obligated by law to teach students how to deal respectfully with sexual diversity in society (Dutch Ministry of Education, Arts & Sciences, 2016). Peer education can be an effective means for that purpose because studies on peer education for sexuality and relationship education demonstrate a positive impact on sexual knowledge (Benni et al., 2014; Forrest, Strange, & Oakley, 2002). In peer education for sexuality and relationship education, more learners accept the main message that is communicated, and learners report more emotional connectedness to peer educators, compared to interventions provided by teachers and advisers. This creates a more open attitude and leads to more productive interactions among students and between peer educators and students (Lee, Donlan, & Paz, 2009; Sriranganathan et al., 2012; Wernick, Dessel, Kulick, & Graham, 2013). Furthermore, peers can act as

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role models when they want to act against LGBT phobia (Wernick et al., 2013). The importance of peer education is confirmed by Meyer and Bayer (2013), who plea for participatory and peer-to-peer methods for reaching the educational goal of reducing sexual prejudice among adolescents through discussion of the contested subject of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) rights.

Most studies on the use of peer education for sexuality and relationship education focus on outcome evaluations (e.g., Kim & Free, 2008; Tolli, 2012). In their literature review, Southgate and Aggleton (2016) demonstrate that in the field of peer educator interventions, researchers rarely examine interactions between the peer educator and the learners as well as peer educators' views regarding their activities during peer education. For a peer educator intervention on a contested topic such as respect for sexual diversity, evaluation of the peer educators' views on the activities they implement for exchanging opinions is important. Different peer educators may implement the same peer education intervention differently as each of them interpret a peer education intervention in their own way. For example, Dhand (2006) and Audrey, Holliday, and Campbell (2006) describe how trained peer educators manipulate a peer education intervention in order to make implementation more suitable to themselves. An in-depth understanding of peer educators' views regarding their activities while conducting peer education could help to improve the ways in which peer education is implemented and can inform future peer educators how to implement a peer educator intervention in the way it is meant. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to gain insight into peer educators' perceptions of the activities they perform in a peer education intervention to promote students' understanding of respect for sexual diversity. For the purposes of this study, sexual diversity is defined as the variation in gender identities and sexual preferences among individuals and between groups (Vanwesenbeeck, 2009).

Activities of peer education

A number of evaluations of peer educator activities show that activities in peer education do not include pedagogy of one-way transmission of information (Adamchak 2006; Azizi, Hamzehgardeshi, and Shahosseini, 2016; Southgate & Aggleton, 2016). Instead, researchers argue that activities in peer education should be interactive, participatory and empowering students. In their narrative review, Azizi et al. (2016) differentiate between personal characteristics, skill characteristics and communication characteristics of peer educators. All characteristics are related to activities during peer education that promote interaction, however. For example, Azizi et al.

(2016) mention being able to listen actively, convey a message convincingly, being non-judgmental, being able to present, giving students the opportunity to share feelings and opinions, and acting as a role mode, as important characteristics of peer educators. Nevertheless, according to Southgate and Aggleton (2016), descriptions of peer educator activities lack attention to the transactional character of peer education that influences the implementation of activities. For example, Forrest's et al. (2002) process evaluation of peer education for sexual and relationship education shows that some male peer educators in class felt personally provoked by the disruptive behavior of male students, which might have influenced the way they implemented the intervention. In Audrey et al.'s (2006) study, trained peer educators made their own choices about whom they should and should not approach with a message against smoking in order to avoid failure experiences. In addition, Dhand (2006) reports that drug users started to feel like experts toward the other drug users because of their peer educator role, and thus, did not share their expertise with the other drug users, but instead lectured them. The examples mentioned above made clear that experiences and feelings of peer educators can have an influence on the way they implement an intervention. Given their importance, in the following section, we will discuss a model of activities of peer education that includes peer educator characteristics.

A model of activities of peer education

Klein and colleagues developed a model of peer education activities based on the study of peer education on responsible use of medications by elderly (Klein, Ritchie, Nathan, & Wutzke, 2014). Klein's model provides a detailed description of activities during the implementation of peer education. This is an advantage of the model over more general behavior change models such as Azjen's Theory of Planned Behavior (Azjen, 1991) or Prochaska and colleagues' Trans Theoretical Model (Prochaska, Redding, & Evers, 2015). Klein and colleagues' model includes four mechanisms along with peer educators' activities, which can be adapted to educational settings:

1. Using educator skills: (a) engage students in the topic, (b) tailor messages to the level and needs of the students, and (c) facilitate discussions of personal experiences via interactive activities.
2. Offering a safe place to learn: activities in order to build a relationship, such as sharing life experiences and cultural issues similar to the ones shared by students.
3. Pushing for change: (a) challenging misconceptions, (b) answering personal questions of students, (c) act as role models and (d) mentors.

4. Reflecting on self: (a) dealing with expectations of students, (b) dealing with their own knowledge gaps.

In each mechanism, a range of activities takes place. In the implementation of peer education on sexual diversity in secondary education, activities are not only directed at conveying the correct information (as in the case of responsible medication usage among seniors), but activities are also aimed at catalyzing different viewpoints concerning the contested and value-laden subject of respect for sexual diversity. In the current study, we focused on describing the activities implemented during peer education; therefore, the fourth mechanism (reflecting on self) was not taken into account as it focuses on the development of the peer educators themselves and not how the intervention was carried out and perceived by the students.

In addition to the four mechanisms, Klein et al. (2014) identify an overarching factor labeled, "life experience," which peer educators use when implementing their activities. "Life experience" can refer to, for example, telling personal stories, emphasizing similarities between peer educators and learners, and demonstrating a role as equal participant instead of an expert role.

Based on the literature on process evaluations of peer education in sexuality and relationship education (SRE) that are school-based or community-based, we will elaborate on the first three mechanisms defined by Klein et al. (2014). In order to detect activities implemented during peer education for sexuality and relationship education, we include nine peer-reviewed studies published since 2000 on process evaluations of peer sexuality education carried out in secondary schools or at community locations with youth 13 years of age or older and peer educators of the same age and up to approximately 30 years.

Mechanism 1: using educator skills

In all nine studies examined it appears that peer educators apply educator skills such as engaging students in the topic, tailoring the messages of the peer education for better reception by students and facilitating discussion of personal experiences among students and in interactions between students and peer educators. Process evaluations with students indicate that students see activities carried out by peer educators as mostly facilitating discussion of personal experiences. In the process evaluation of a peer-led intervention in secondary schools in central southern England conducted by Forrest et al. (2002), students reported that the teaching techniques of the peer educators made it easier to discuss sensitive and personal issues.

Students could speak privately with one peer educator about sexuality issues when more peer educators were in the classroom. Further, Layzer, Rosapep, and Barr (2017) mention the option to speak in a more intimate setting. Peer educators facilitating the exchange of personal information between students and peer educators was also valued in an intervention in Tshwane, South Africa (Visser, 2007). Peer educators reported that students were challenged to overcome their shyness and reluctance to talk openly about sexual matters in school. Because of the peer educators' commitment and enthusiasm, involvement of students in class discussions seemed to increase (Visser, 2007).

Activities peer educators use to better tailor messages to students are mentioned in the process evaluation of Backett-Milburn and Wilson (2000) of peer education in Scotland. These authors report on peer educators delivering messages about HIV and AIDS in casual talks with friends in informal settings, such as during lunch break at school. Peer educators provided examples about their ability to assess how, and in which situations, information about HIV and AIDS would be understood and accepted by students. Students in the process evaluation of Forrest et al. (2002) evaluated peer educators positively because they demonstrated a relaxed attitude, such as allowing students to walk freely in the classroom and have fun while engaging in peer education.

A process evaluation conducted by Benni et al. (2014) assessed activities of peer educators for engaging students and tailoring messages related to sexual health issues. They report almost all students indicated that they felt emotionally involved during peer education and that peer education is the right way to discuss sexual health issues. Descriptions that are more general derive from the study of Al-Iryani, Al-Sakkaf, Basaleem, Kok, & van den Borne (2010) which focused on the implementation and evaluation of a community peer-education program for youth HIV prevention in Aden, Yemen. In this process evaluation, Yemeni youth reported the peer educator's talk had a profound impact, resulting in a behavioral change to protect themselves against HIV.

Campbell and MacPhail (2002) report on peer educators implementing a rather traditional lecturing style in a HIV prevention peer-education program in a township near Johannesburg, South Africa. Also studies of Fields and Copp (2015) and of Layzer et al. (2017) report on peer educators who resorted to lecturing when they had not adequately prepared a lesson plan. Both peer educators and students reported that in these situations peer educators were "doing too much from the book" (Layzer et al., 2017, p. 519).

In addition to the activities of peer educators for facilitation of student and peer educator interactions, informal discussions, and lecturing as a way

of teaching content, role-play is a frequently applied teaching activity. In the process evaluation of Layzer et al. (2017), students reported that they found role-playing as part of small group discussions engaging. Plummer et al. (2007) evaluated a peer education program that made use of role-play as well. Peer educators implemented a series of role-play scenarios and assisted teachers in the classroom. Students reported that they enjoyed and appreciated the role-play sketches because they were both informative and activating.

Mechanism 2: offering a safe place to learn

One of the most important aspects of peer education is that it can offer students a safe learning environment, because peer educators can connect to adolescent students, especially when peer educators establish positive relationships with the students by sharing life experiences and cultural issues similar to those of their students. In Forrest et al. (2002), students reported that similarity in age and student status made peer educators more empathetic than their traditional teachers. In Fields and Copp (2015), peer educators mentioned that, compared to teachers, they understood their students better because they were more of the same age as the students. Fields and Copp (2015) are the only authors who mention gender and sexual identity of the peer educators. The other authors do not mention this and do not state whether the sexual and relationship education is about heterosexual or homosexual intimacy or both. However, the activities implemented by peer educators to build meaningful relationships with their students did not always receive positive evaluations. Visser (2007) observed that students were making fun of peer educators trying to build positive relationships with students. Nevertheless, as the program progressed, peer educators were better able to build more positive relationships. In the study done by Campbell and MacPhail (2002), students were observed teasing the peer educators; these students showed strong rejection of the program.

In addition to similarity in experience, age, and status, Al-Iryani et al. (2010) discuss the acceptance of the program among community leaders as a means of creating a safe learning environment. According to Forrest et al. (2002), mutual respect also seems to support a safe learning environment. In this study, students appreciated peer educators for not moralizing, patronizing, or being disrespectful. In contrast, Campbell and MacPhail (2002) report a lack of respect toward peer educators when male peer educators were bullying female peer educators outside the classroom.

Mechanism 3: pushing for change

In Klein et al. (2014), four types of strategies are mentioned with the aim of pushing for change: (1) challenging misconceptions, (2) helping learners with their personal questions, (3) acting as role models, and (4) acting as mentors. Only in a few process evaluations is attention paid to this third mechanism of Klein et al. (2014). Iryani et al. (2011) mention that misconceptions about people living with HIV/AIDS were challenged leading to peers and peer educators reporting that they changed attitudes toward people living with HIV/AIDS and that they learned to deal kindly with people living with HIV/AIDS. Benni et al. (2014) and Layzer et al. (2017) mention students acquired more knowledge. Layzer and colleagues report also that students intended to change their unsafe sexual behavior. Klein et al.'s third strategy, "acting as role models," appeared in the studies of Visser (2007) and Plummer et al. (2007), where peer educators acted as role models by talking openly about sexual behavior. In regards to "acting as mentors," Visser (2007) reports that peer educators were confronted with such serious problems as rape and trauma that they found it too difficult to help students.

This study

The studies described above provide information on how Klein's mechanisms were used in peer education about sexuality for adolescents. In Mechanism 1, adolescent peer educators, in general, use a wide range of activities with their educator skills. Engaging students and adapting messages are present in most peer education on the topic of sexuality. Facilitating discussions involving sharing of personal experiences and a relaxed attitude are considered the most important educator skills. Informal discussions and role-playing can be considered as the facilitation of discussion with students in which personal information is shared. However, when the facilitation of discussion appeared to be insufficient, some peer educators resort to lecturing, an educator skill not mentioned in the model developed by Klein et al. (2014). Regarding Mechanism 2, in all nine process evaluations, adolescent peer educators applied activities meant to build a close relationship with their peers, especially when peer educator and students are of the same age and have a similar background. Several other activities can be grouped into Mechanism 2, such as those that focus on obtaining agreement with and acceptance of the programs' content from the local community, and mutual respect between peer educators and students. Finally, for Mechanism 3, of Klein et al.'s strategies, only role modeling has been reported. For a peer education about a value-laden topic the activities for the mechanisms "using educator skills," "offering a safe place

to learn" and "pushing for change" are adequate to describe the peer educator intervention. Guided by this framework, the following research question directed this study:

> How do peer educators (18–30 years old) perceive activities they implemented in a peer education on respect for sexual diversity in Dutch secondary education?

Method

We used a descriptive study design. We created a peer education intervention based on intergroup contact and a pedagogical approach of interaction and discussion instead of transmitting information. This open setup of the intervention gave the peer educators the opportunity to adapt the lessons to discuss a contested topic of sexual and gender diversity. According to Felten and Vijlbrief (2018), for optimal impact, exchange of personal information and listening to each other's stories is important. Below—after we have described recruitment and training of peer educators—we describe the outline of the lessons.

Peer educator recruitment and training

Students from universities of applied sciences aged 18 years or older were recruited for training as peer educators because we expected that somewhat older peer educators would be better able to gain authority for conducting orderly lessons compared to peers. We considered some authority necessary in case there were LGBT students in the class whom we had to offer a safe learning environment. In addition, Fields and Copp (2015) and Forrest et al. (2002) describe class management problems of peer educators who are from the same school and the same age group. It appears in these studies that 16/17 year old peer educators were not adept at handling disruptive behavior.

From Spring 2014 until Spring 2016, LGBT and heterosexual students from universities of applied sciences were recruited for training as peer educators. The training of peer educators consisted of lectures about sexual diversity and peer teaching and exercises to invite participants to share personal information. Students learned how to use small group discussions as a tool for creating a safe space for sharing personal information. They practiced in the training activities to generate interaction between peer educators and students. Training prepared them how to respond to questions after a personal (coming out) story. Further, peer educators could choose which peer educator or all of them would tell a coming out story in class. Peer educators were trained to react with patience to all kinds of questions of students and all their opinions.

After completing this training, peer educators carried out a series of five sessions in a pre-vocational high school. The main objective of the lessons was to raise students' awareness about LGBT-related issues by facilitating interactions among students and between students and peer educators during and following various tasks. Peer educators were trained not to impose their views on students, but rather to invite students to explain their personal thoughts and possible questions. Teachers were present in class to support the peer educators. The lessons were informed by reviews of intervention studies applying intergroup contact that showed indeed sexual prejudice is reduced (Paluck & Green, 2009; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005). Additionally, some of the activities were informed by the theory of extended contact developed by Wright, McLaughlin-Volpe, and Ropp (1997) which theorizes that prejudices about the outgroup decrease when students watch friendly cooperation between members of the in-group with members of the out-group. Furthermore, in his intervention study, Van de Ven (1995) argues that the pedagogical approach of exchange of opinions without judgment for non-tolerant beliefs and the opportunity to ask personal questions are essential to initiate positive attitude change toward LGBT persons. Finally, by implementing their own ideas for an activity we wanted to give students opportunity for experimenting with behavior that supports respect for LGBT persons.

Outline of the lessons

See Table 1.

Researcher description

The first author has experience in implementing peer-to-peer projects with pedagogy students of universities of applied sciences and cooperation in peer research with pre-vocational secondary school students. She created the peer education intervention based on previous experiences in the LGBTQI+ community. Students who were trained as peer educators contributed to the intervention with ideas for activities such as the coming out story, icebreaker games and the presentation on transgender people.

Participants

In this study, 26 peer educators of 36 classes in five pre-vocational secondary schools participated. Of the total 43 trained peer educators who were active in this peer education intervention program, 26 were interviewed. Interviewees were selected if they had executed at least four lessons in one

Table 1. Sessions, objectives and activities.

Session	Objectives:	Activities:
1.	• Introduction of each other and to the subject and, • Creating a climate of openness	• Two short exercises (energizers) to learn names and playful sharing personal information; • Class discussion to make agreements about sharing personal information; • Small group discussion about societal issues or on behalf of a quiz; • In 2016, the first lesson also introduced the perspective of an LGB peer through a film about friendship between heterosexual and LGB peers.
2.	• Dialogue with personal information about the subject and, • Opportunity to become more knowledgeable	• Read a translated chapter from James Howe's *The Misfits* and small group discussion about solidarity with an LGB peer or, • Watch a short film about friendship and coming out and small group discussion about friendship with an LGB peer; • In 2015 and 2016, instead of film and text peer educators told personal (coming out) stories with opportunity to ask questions; • In 2016, we added to the coming out stories an exercise to write a letter of advice to a girl worrying her friend is gay.
3.	• Receive information about gender and sexual diversity and, • Exchange and discuss opinions and views about this subject	• Coming out stories and opportunity to ask questions (in 2015 and 2016 scheduled in lesson 2); • Discussion of gender and sexual diversity; • House of Commons exercise about stereotypes; • In 2016, a presentation about the transformation process of trans gender people was added and an explanation of the gender bread person.
4.	• Evaluate the lessons through dialogue and stimulate LGBT affirmative behavior	• Association game with cards to ask students to express what they thought of the lessons (or answer to evaluative questions); • Brainstorming and planning an activity for the fifth lesson that promotes social acceptance of LGBT in class/ school, a budget was available for implementing activities. • In 2016, at one school the activity of lesson 5 of making posters was integrated in lesson 4.
5.	• Give opportunity for LGBT affirmative behavior	• A "Pink" market in the hallways or, • Soccer in pink T-shirts or, • A rainbow closet for coming out or, • Painting posters for respect for LGBT-peers or, • Paint T-shirts for respect for LGBT or, • Watch a short movie or, • Presentations of: a comic, paintings, quizzes, poems, posters, PowerPoints.

or more classes. Of these 26 peer educators, 21 had completed the full series of four or five meetings in two or more classes; the other 5 had carried out the full series of four or five meetings in one class. The youngest interviewee was aged 18 years old, the oldest 30. Of the interviewees, two peer

educators were transgender (male to female), eleven were males (two heterosexual) and thirteen were females (seven heterosexual).

Data collection

In total, 23 semi-structured interviews were administered by the first author who had been present at most of the lessons carried out by the interviewed peer educators. Each interview lasted between 10 and 75 minutes: 17 face-to-face interviews and six interviews by phone calls. Of the face-to-face interviews, three were held with a pair of peer educators, 14 were audio recorded and literally transcribed, and the researcher summarized nine. Interviews were held one to four weeks after the intervention. Peer educators were interviewed at the institute or in a café, and in one case, at the home of a peer educator. At the start of the interview, the interviewer introduced the objective of the interview. All peer educators provided their consent to participate and were offered the opportunity to opt out at any time. The participants had the opportunity to revise the interview transcript, but no one did.

In the interviews, not only Klein et al.'s mechanisms were questioned, but peer educators were also asked to describe the implementation of the lesson series, including the introductory icebreaker, as well as their preparation and expectations for each lesson. Peer educators were asked to report students' reactions, their interactions with students, and their evaluation of the activities. Furthermore, peer educators were asked about their own attitudes toward the students, resistance of students to peer education and how they themselves benefited from peer education. Finally, they were asked to report (1) the most effective activities, (2) the one that generated the most fun, (3) what they thought they had achieved with the lessons, (4) their ideas about students' attitudes toward LGBT, (5) their experiences with the involvement of the teacher present at the lessons, and (6) moments when they disliked being a peer educator. From the answers to question 5, we conclude that teachers generally were very sparingly involved in the peer education intervention.

Data analysis

In a first round of categorizing the data have been ordered into 15 categories consisting of the several activities that peer educators carried out. After this, we used a theory-driven analysis by clustering these activities based on the three mechanisms from the model of Klein et al. (2014). The statements of the peer educators were sorted under each of Klein et al.'s mechanisms and the 15 categories of activities (Table 2).

Table 2. Mechanisms and categories of activities in peer education for sexual diversity.

Mechanism	Cluster:	Activities:
1. Using educator skills	• Engage in the topic:	• to arouse the interest and curiosity of the students for the topic
	• Tailor messages:	• to connect language and messages to the level and interest of the student
	• Facilitate sharing personal experiences:	• to encourage students to give their opinion
	• Show relaxed attitude:	• to keep talking with the student group even if a student disturbs order
	• Start informal discussions:	• to start short conversations in the margins of the program
	• Lecture:	• to instruct students
	• Role-play:	• to apply role-play and other drama methods
2. Offer a safe place to learn	• Show similarity in experiences, age, and student status:	• to introduce themselves as equals to the students
	• Build relationship:	• to speak freely about personal experiences
	• Act for mutual respect:	• to show respect for all kinds of questions and the comments in class
3. Pushing for change	• Challenge misconceptions:	• to offer new perspectives on students' knowledge and beliefs
	• Help students with their personal questions:	• to provide individual attention for students with questions
	• Act as role models:	• to speak about their acceptance and respect of sexual diversity
	• Act as mentors:	• to give personal advice
	• Improve knowledge:	• to teach students appropriate terms and information

Results

Using educator skills

We have distinguished seven categories of peer-education activities for this mechanism (see Table 1). The activities are exemplary for conveying a message in a personal way so that it is accepted and understood by the students. Peer educators can make the message interesting, suitable and personal. A relaxed attitude and informal discussions can be helpful for students' willingness to listen to the peer educators. Finally, peer educators used techniques such as lecturing and role-play.

Engage in the topic

LGBT and heterosexual peer educators mentioned that their personal or coming out story was the best way to *engage* with students. A lesbian peer educator (pe) explained that the coming out stories were a good activity to emotionally involve the students:

> … then we really had contact and could do something for their thinking. […] They also almost started to … not identifying but they began to imagine what it would be like to be a LGBT person. (pe [21] 2015)

Their coming out story was for most LGBT peer educators an easy way to engage with students and make them curious and asking questions about LGBT lives. Answering students' questions about their coming out story was easy for most LGBT peer educators who had already been "out" for some years. A lesbian peer educator mentioned that students learn the most from personal coming out stories:

> … [they learned the most] in the first lesson because we [peer educators] were very open then. And then students even stayed in class. It is often the case that if they ask a lot of questions, then they want to know more and that sticks better. (pe [21] 2014)

When students did not ask questions after the coming out story, peer educators tried their best to startup interaction. A bisexual male peer educator described how he managed this with his colleague-peer educators: "*At one point we just started asking each other questions to get the group going a bit, but that was pretty*…." (pe [24] 2015).

Tailor messages

In order to *tailor messages* to the students, peer educators choose content and explanations related to adolescent interests. A female bisexual peer educator (22) reported she was surprised by the questions about how gays and lesbians have sex. She explained that by putting herself in the shoes of this age group she was able to deal with their questions: "*It is very much about sex, but yes they are teenagers and that is what goes on in their head.*" A male gay peer educator mentioned the following how he explained his message to the students:

> … 'if you think very logically when I … uh … if you have a choice in this straight world are you going to be gay?' You know that's how I turned it around (pe [23] 2014)

Facilitate sharing personal experiences

The peer educators participating in our program employed several activities for *sharing of personal information*—as described in the peer-to-peer intervention manual and in training—in order to deliver the message of respect for LGBT individuals. A lesbian peer educator described a small group activity: *It went smoothly. There were two girls who jumped out. They wanted to discuss all kinds of topics.* (pe [25] 2015). Peer educators mentioned that students' attitudes toward LGBT persons were quite "open" because almost always students were willing to participate in activities for sharing opinions about the topic of LGBT persons and their lives. Very occasionally, the teacher helped the students to share their experiences in the group. One of the peer educators mentioned that after explaining

appropriate and inappropriate words to address an LGBT peer, the teacher asked the class who had ever used the inappropriate words. A female heterosexual peer educator mentioned: "*Yesterday at a double class when the teacher asked the students 'who ever called someone like that?'*." (pe [19] 2016). Peer educators mentioned that some students were shy or reluctant to share experiences or gave socially desirable reactions in small group discussions. Peer educators did not know in all situations how to keep students actively involved. A female, heterosexual peer educator explained how she motivated students to stay involved in small group discussions and stimulated their thinking:

> If you are in a small group, they quickly lose attention or they always say 'I think the same as him.' If they stray then you ask 'Can you stay with it' and 'Please try to describe a little what you think of the lessons or about the subject and not based on the opinion of your fellow student' or 'Describe with some more words.' And most of the times they get stuck but you do make them think. (pe [23] 2016)

Show a relaxed attitude constituted an important peer educator skill. Some peer educators admitted that they did not always correct misbehavior, also they allowed laughter, gave explanations at all times, and stayed optimistic. A gay male peer educator reported: "*Even with noisy students in class, when they give their opinion, it can be a successful lesson.*" (pe [30] 2016). A bisexual peer educator (25) mentioned: "*That you think: 'Yes, we remain positive and we will continue to do that lesson over and over again. No matter how difficult it sometimes is.*" (pe [25] 2015). Yet a few peer educators had some negative feelings about being a peer educator in these situations. A heterosexual female peer educator mentioned: "*In the beginning it was a bit less nice for me, it was hard. The last lesson was good.*" (pe [18] 2016). Another heterosexual female peer educators reported less diplomatic: "*At the second school it was just shit.*" (pe [23] 2016).

Start informal discussions

During the planned activities of the peer education program, some peer educators also started informal discussions. A bisexual female peer educator (20) stated: "*A boy, he really opposed homosexuality but I had such a nice conversation. We interacted quite intensively.*" (pe [20] 2016). A gay peer educator (19) explained he wanted to gain confidence with students in these informal discussions: "*I want to know who has problems with the topic. And the way to do that is by gaining confidence.*" (pe [19] 2014).

Lecture

To underline that they did not want to resort to lecturing, peer educators said they started the first lesson with the statement, "*we're not here to tell*

you what to think." A female bisexual peer educator (22) reported about her attitude toward the students: "*Don't say with a raised finger: 'We disagree with what your parents or family have said!*'" (pe [22] 2014).

Role-play

Instead of implementing *role-play* in peer education as described by Layzer et al. (2017) and Visser (2007), peer educators asked students to imagine that they had LGBT classmates or teammates, or that they were gay themselves, and what the reactions of their peers and family would be.

Offer a safe place to learn

In the previous section, we mentioned which activities help peer educators to communicate their message to the students. In addition to these specific educational activities, the atmosphere in the classroom can help to get a message accepted in a group. Thus, peer educators also apply activities that make the classroom a safe place to discuss personal topics. This section is about those activities for providing a safe place for learning.

We have distinguished three categories of peer-education activities related to the mechanism "Offer a safe place to learn" (see Table 1).

Show similarities in experiences, age, and student status to the students they are teaching is mentioned by some peer educators of non-Dutch origin as an advantage for delivering a message advocating for respect for sexual diversity. A bisexual female peer educator stated: "*I had the advantage that in their perspective I'm also a migrant*." (pe [20] 2016). Similarly, a gay peer educator: "*Then you have a connection with those teens. They think 'Oh, gays also exist in that culture'*." (pe [23] 2014). Most peer educators attempted to imbue confidence in students in order to stimulate them to share their personal experiences. Peer educators reported that when they showed exemplary behavior, such as openness and vulnerability, they stimulated the same in students, thereby creating a safe place to learn.

Build relationship

According to several peer educators, relaying a coming out story contributed significantly to the creation of a safe atmosphere of openness. A transgender peer educator how this was accomplished "*… by telling our story. To create an atmosphere that it is okay to be vulnerable*." (pe [29] 2014). Moreover, following the coming out story, the question and answer interaction created a closer relationship between students and peer educators. Several peer educators described the coming out lesson as "nice." A bisexual male peer educator's comment exemplifies this reaction: "*I just*

enjoyed doing all the coming out lessons. All students always had many questions as well." (pe [25] 2015). Similarly, a bisexual female peer educator stated: "*They were impressed with all our stories. They asked good questions, they listened really carefully.*" (pe [18] 2016).

Act for mutual respect

Peer educators often mentioned respect for the opinions and stories of the students as a necessary attitude within peer education. All peer educators demonstrated that everybody is entitled to have their own opinion. Peer educators mentioned that it is necessary to show respect for students' opinions, especially in interactions with the students who question the acceptability of LGBT individuals. A female bisexual peer educator explained: "*Don't say 'You have to think this or that!'. Don't try to deny what the student thinks but present a different image.*" (pe [22] 2014). Peer educators reported that respect for the students' opinions will contribute to and may finally lead to respect for LGBT people. Peer educators expected some homonegativity in class, still some peer educators had to get accustomed to homonegativity. A heterosexual female peer educator reported: "*About Turkish and Moroccan students you know how they think and feel, but it was new to me that they express it that way.*" (pe [23] 2016)

Pushing for change

Five categories of peer-education activities related to pushing for change have been distinguished (see Table 1). As already mentioned in the mechanism "Using educator skills," peer educators—especially LGBT peer educators—reported that sharing their personal coming-out story had the most impact on changing the attitude of students toward LGBT people. In the mechanism "Offer a safe place to learn" peer educators' personal disclosure ensured acceptance among students of the peer education and also an open atmosphere was created. In the interviews, peer educators also offered many examples of activities belonging to "Pushing for change" of how they attempted to frame and present the knowledge and beliefs of students in a new way in order to challenge misconceptions.

Challenge misconceptions

Peer educators *challenged misconceptions* by informing students, making them aware of prejudices, offering them new perspectives on judgements about LGBT people, and explaining stereotypes. Peer educators provided students with definitions of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender and they explained the difference between transvestite and transgender in order

to use proper terms for transgender people. For instance, peer educators explained that the belief that all gay men are effeminate and are recognizable by their feminine looks is a stereotypical way of thinking. They told the students that stereotypes may be true for some lesbians and gay men, but not for all of them. They also explained that being gay is not a choice (like being gothic, for instance), nor is it something to be ashamed of. One peer educator mentioned that she encouraged students to think about the reasons for their beliefs and to explore for themselves what to think about gay men and lesbian women. Other peer educators reported that they searched for the beliefs behind students' attitudes. A bisexual male peer educator insisted in a small group discussion with students giving polite answers: "*What did you* really *think when you heard we would come to give these lessons?*" A female bisexual peer educator compared generalizations about gay men with generalizations about ethnic minorities:

> They were always talking about gays wearing mascara and being a bit feminine, and then 'Yes, like Gordon on TV'. But then I said 'yes but that's on TV'. That Moroccan youth on television are also mirrored as annoying youth. And then I said 'but you are not annoying at all, you are just nice guys.' (pe [22], 2014)

Help students with their personal questions

In small group discussions, peer educators discussed students' personal questions. Students with anti-gay and anti-lesbian feelings sometimes shared their doubts about the message of respect for LGBT persons. A gay male peer educator tried to help a student: "*You do not have to be close friends, but respect is important. I went on to talk about that and he said there is something in it"* (pe [30] 2016). Peer educators mentioned that in small groups the discussions between students and peer educators contributed to a better understanding and possibly a change in attitude toward LGBT peers. A bisexual female peer educator (18) in 2016 reported: "*When we discussed this [stereotypes] it was soon said 'oh yes, that does not apply to everyone.*'"

Act as role models

Peer educators *acted as role models*, and because they accept their own sexuality brought the topic into students' daily life. A gay peer educator said, "*You make them think 'I am there too and we are there too*'" (pe [26] 2014). After the coming-out story, students had the opportunity to make more contact with the peer educator, and they had the opportunity to ask personal questions and obtain real-life information. A gay peer educator indicated "*They started asking questions 'When did you decide to become gay?' and uh 'How did you find out? '*" (pe [23] 2014).

In addition, heterosexual peer educators deliberately acted as role models. A transgender peer educator (29) described how her heterosexual colleague peer educator also acted as a role model: "*She mentioned 'I'm heterosexual but it is rather good to think about this'. 'It is not weird to support LGBT people'.*"

Act as mentors

Students did not ask the peer educators for personal advice about their own sexual orientation. Peer educators did not encourage students in class to come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender.

Improve knowledge

Peer educators reported about conversations with students who had very little knowledge about homosexuality and who wondered whether a lesbian and a gay man were woman and man. Finally, peer educators often compared love between two men or two women with heterosexual love to explain the words homosexual, lesbian and bisexual.

Discussion

In this study, we explored peer education with adolescents about the subject of respect for sexual diversity using a model with three core mechanisms: (1) using educator skills, (2) offering a safe place to learn, and (3) pushing for change (Klein et al., 2014). As expected, the mechanisms played a role in peer education, with the overarching factor, "life experience," entwined in the coming-out story of the peer educators, which was integrated with most activities.

The coming-out story played a central role in the intervention because it made an intimate topic open to discussion. Related to the first mechanism, using educator skills, telling the coming-out story was very useful for engaging students and tailoring the contested subject of sexual diversity to a personal level better suitable for students. By doing this, the sharing of personal experiences was also facilitated. For the second mechanism, offering a safe place to learn, sharing a coming-out story promoted the creation of a safe environment because it relates to all adolescents—whether heterosexual or LGBT—who are at the middle of their identity development. The positive student experiences connected to the coming-out stories align with findings of Forrest et al.—i.e., that students see peer educators as "reliable informants because they provide realistic information embedded in their own experiences" (Forrest et al., 2002, p. 205). Furthermore, the coming-out story contributes to the development of a confidential relationship between peer educators and students because it discloses personal information. Especially in a case where the coming-out story raises questions and

peer educators feel safe to answer these questions, the coming-out story may result in a class climate where someone can speak about his or her own sexual orientation. Coming-out stories seem to increase emotional proximity between peer educator and student, creating an intimate peer-to-peer interaction. Riggs, Rosenthal, and Smith-Bonahue (2011) also stress the importance of this connectedness between educators and students. Finally, with their openness about their own sexuality, peer educators act as role models for their students.

Related to the third mechanism, pushing for change, again the coming-out story was an important activity of the peer educators. In addition, peer educators asked students questions with the purpose of inviting students to reflect on their attitudes and assumptions. This is an elaboration on Forrest et al.'s observations that peer educators invited students to contribute their own views (Forrest et al., 2002, p. 211). Peer educators asking students questions to encourage them to reflect on their own views may have been more effective than simply waiting for students to ask questions following the coming-out story.

Other strategies beyond the coming-out story were shown to play an important role in peer education as well. For example, in order to promote the active involvement of students, peer educators discussed comparisons between homosexuality and heterosexuality and between LGBT people and members of other minority groups, such as ethnic minorities. Compared to regular teachers, peer educators might be better able to engage students, because—as also found by Forrest et al. (2002)—they are less strict, more tolerant toward students (mis)behavior, and not afraid to show their own ignorance when questions become very specific.

Within the group of 26 peer educators interviewed, differences between heterosexual peer educators and LGBT peer educators were found. Heterosexual peer educators had, as a consequence of being heterosexual, no coming out story. The older heterosexual peer educators (21–30 years) could "compensate" their lack of a coming out story with using educator skills of telling a personal story of experiences with LGBT friends or family. The younger heterosexual peer educators (18–20 years) were more often in their first year of university and had less educator experience. A few young heterosexual peer educators compensated their lack of experience with a great interest, commitment and ownership to promoting respect for sexual diversity. The slightly older heterosexual peer educators mentioned in the interviews more examples of discussions with students about what is a respectful attitude when students admitted that accepting sexual diversity is difficult. They seemed to be better able to empathize with students who could not just accept homosexuality and transgender people. For LGBT peer educators it seemed easier to engage students and stimulate empathizing with LGBT persons because they could draw from their own

experiences, which made them appear as more authentic. The importance of the *person of the peer educator* in the implementation of peer education is also reported in process evaluations by Forrest et al. (2002), Plummer et al. (2007) and Visser (2007). They report about peer educators who are (in the beginning) too shy to talk about sexuality or who are not serious in implementing activities.

Limitations and directions for future research

One limitation of this study refers to the background of the peer educator, which might be quite important for the effectiveness of the peer education (Forrest et al., 2002). First, the peer educator teams of three to four peer educators per class consisted mainly of females. It might reflect the phenomenon that young women are more accepting of lesbians and gay men than young men (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2012; Kwon & Hugelshofer 2012). Secondly, of the participants in this study, nine of the eleven male peer educators, and six of the thirteen female peer educators were gay/queer or bisexual and two peer educators were transgender. The LGBT interviewees may have overrated the coming out story. Heterosexual peer educators may have implemented other activities such as creating awareness of heterosexual privilege as was found by Boulden (2004). Thirdly, six of the male peer educators, seven of the female peer educators, and one of the two transgender peer educators, were of Dutch origin. This could have led to biases toward the activities of peer educators as role model in multicultural classes. Also students from a multicultural background may have experienced coming out stories—either from bicultural LGBT peer educators or from peer educators of Dutch origin—as imposing an ideal of Western liberal sexual identity (Cense & Ganzevoort 2017). In future research, a survey among all peer educators and their students can more precisely examine background characteristics leading to a better understanding of what activities are best implemented by different peer educators.

Another limitation of this study is that only the peer educators' perceptions of their activities were reported. Inquiry into the perceptions of teachers regarding their influence on the impact of peer education activities would expand our knowledge about the impact of peer education activities. Additionally, inquiry into the experiences of the students also seems to be valuable. In their process evaluation, Layzer et al. (2017) found that students sometimes encounter peer educators who are incapable of making a connection with students. Inquiry into the opinions and experiences of students will contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms and the implementation activities within each mechanism, involved in peer education.

Conclusion

In this study, our aim was to gain insight into the activities of peer educators with students during a peer education intervention on respect for sexual diversity. We discovered that the peer educators considered the coming-out stories of LGBT peer educators as an engaging, authentic, and unique opportunity for students to become aware of, and potentially accept, LGBT individuals. When LGBT peer educators shared these stories, and when heterosexual peer educators shared stories of their experiences with the LGBT community, they felt that credibility of their message among students increased. The coming-out stories of the LGBT peer educators also increased the emotional proximity between peer educator and student. By sharing their personal stories, peer educators gave teachers the opportunity to help their students to reflect on their beliefs about sexual diversity.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in this study. The authors also certify that this paper meets the ethical standards of the APA Code of Conduct and the paper also complies with the authors' national ethical codes of conduct for research integrity.

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