

Challenging heteronormativity through literature

Teaching David Levithan's *Boy meets boy*
with norm critical pedagogy

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Abstract

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Summary:

There are many reasons to use literature in the language classroom. It can help pupils develop their abilities to read, listen, speak and write. Literature can also give pupils new perspectives and cultural enrichment. The aim of this study is to show how teachers can use literature to combat intolerance and homophobia. The thesis statement is that David Levithan's novel *Boy meets boy* can be a valuable resource for teachers who want to use norm critical pedagogy in their teaching of English as a second language. Norm critical pedagogy is a pedagogical theory that focuses on norms and their roles in power structures. Norms are usually taken for granted and made invisible and the first step in any norm critical work is therefore to discern them. *Boy meets boy* can help pupils do that. It introduces readers to a world without homophobia, a world where hetero-, homo- and bisexuality are considered equally normal. Heteronormativity is disrupted, and readers are encouraged to question their assumptions of normalcy. It could thus be argued that *Boy meets boy* is suitable to use as a starting point for norm critical discussions on gender and sexuality. This essay contains a literary and didactic analysis of Levithan's novel as well as examples of norm critical exercises for the language classroom.

Table of contents

Introduction	
1. Teaching <i>Boy meets boy</i> in the language classroom	1
1.1. Why teach literature in the language classroom?	3
1.2. Why teach <i>Boy meets boy</i> ?	4
1.3. A discussion of possible difficulties	5
2. Theory	7
2.1. Queer theory	7
2.2. Norm critical theory	8
3. Analysis	10
3.1. Teaching <i>Boy meets boy</i> : a general lesson plan	10
3.2. <i>Boy meets boy</i> and norm critical pedagogy	12
3.3. Themes for literary analysis and practical work in the classroom	14
3.3.1. Gender performativity	14
3.3.2. Sexuality	17
3.3.2.1. Heteronormativity and labelling	17
3.3.2.2. Sexual identities	19
3.4. What about class and ethnicity?	21
4. Conclusion and final reflections	24
Bibliography	26

Introduction

The Education Act (SFS 2010:800) and the Swedish curriculums (Skolverket 2011a and 2011b) both clearly stress the importance of democracy and equality, values which are described as fundamental for the school system. The curriculums for the upper secondary school, Gy11, and for the compulsory school, preschool class and the leisure-time centre, Lgr11, furthermore state that school should promote understanding of other people and the ability to emphasize:

Concern for the well-being and development of the individual should permeate all school activity. No one should be subjected to discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic affiliation, religion or other belief system, transgender identity or its expression, sexual orientation, age or functional impairment or other degrading treatment. Such tendencies should be actively combated. Xenophobia and intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures. (Skolverket 2011a:11, Skolverket 2011b:9)

Apart from the information that intolerance must be confronted with knowledge, open discussion and active measures, very little is said about *how* intolerant tendencies should be combated. This essay has been inspired by norm critical pedagogy, a pedagogy which argues that in order to counter xenophobia and intolerance we must look at and challenge the norms which sanction such tendencies. Teachers and pupils should look at their own role in power structures. That is however not an easy thing to do; people generally find it easier to talk about those who differ from the norm than the norm itself (Kumashiro 2002: 1-2). Because norms are usually taken for granted they become invisible. The first step in any norm critical work is therefore to discern the norm and make it visible, but how can I as a future teacher of English in Sweden best help my pupils to do that? Literature can, I believe, be a valuable resource for that purpose. Research in the field of queer and norm critical pedagogy has in fact shown that normative assumptions and hegemonic narratives can be challenged by alternative stories (Bromseth & Darj 2010: 39). The text that I have chosen to study for this essay is David Levithan's *Boy meets boy* from 2003. *Boy meets boy* is entertaining, well-written and highly acclaimed, but it is also a novel that encourages the reader to question normalcy and heteronormativity. Levithan introduces his reader to a world without homophobia, a world where homosexuality or bisexuality are regarded as just as normal as heterosexuality and where the quarterback is also the home coming queen. My thesis

statement for this essay is that *Boy meets boy* can be a valuable resource for teachers who want to teach norm critically about heteronormativity and homophobia. The novel makes readers question ideas of normalcy and is thus, I would argue, well suited to use as a starting point for norm critical discussions. The purpose of the essay is thus to show how *Boy meets boy* can be taught norm critically to pupils taking English 5 at the upper secondary school.

In the first chapter of the essay I will argue for the use of literature in the language classroom. I will also introduce the novel chosen for study and discuss difficulties that might arise throughout the teaching process. In chapter two I will introduce the theoretical starting points for the project: queer theory and norm critical pedagogy. Chapter three contains the didactic and literary analysis of *Boy meets boy* as well as practical ideas for the classroom. Finally, chapter four contains some final reflections and the conclusion of the project.

1. Teaching *Boy meets boy* in the language classroom

In this chapter I will discuss the concept of teaching literature in the language classroom. The novel *Boy meets boy* will be introduced and I will also address possible concerns that may arise from the classification of *Boy meets boy* as a LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi, Trans and Queer) novel.

1.1. Why teach literature in the language classroom?

The opportunities that extensive reading affords learners of all ages and levels of language proficiency makes it a useful resource. Learners can build their language competence, progress in their reading ability, become more independent in their studies, acquire culture knowledge and develop confidence and motivation to carry on learning. (Hedge 2000: 205)

There are many reasons to use literature in the language classroom. The syllabus for English at the upper secondary level distinguishes four areas of language learning: reading, listening, speaking and writing (Skolverket 2011c). Reading literature can help pupils develop their abilities in all four areas. An interesting text can form the basis for oral discussions and written assignments. Extensive reading increases the learner's vocabulary and helps the learner understand which words are appropriate in which context (Hedge 2000: 204), which means that reading can help pupils become better writers. Literature can also spur personal involvement. Learning a language is sometimes hard work, but reading literature and engaging imaginatively with a text can, as Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater (2008) propose, allow learners "to shift the focus of their attention beyond the more mechanical aspects of the foreign language system. [...] The language becomes 'transparent'" (5-6). In order to achieve that effect, the teacher must choose a novel that is meaningful, enjoyable and relevant to the life experiences of the learner. I would argue that *Boy meets boy* fulfils these criteria. It is well-written and relatable to teenagers.¹ Literature is furthermore authentic material in the sense that it is not, like a lot of textbook material, written or adapted for learners. It thus exposes learners to a genuine and undistorted language intended for native speakers (Collie &

¹ *Boy meets boy* will be further introduced in 1.2.

Slater 2008: 3-4). When realising that they can understand and process such material, learners will hopefully boost their confidence.

In addition to language enhancement, extensive reading also provides cultural enrichment. The learner gets an insight into an English-speaking country without actually going there, which is a huge benefit since not all pupils have had or will have the opportunity to visit an English-speaking country. The syllabus for the English subject states that pupils “should be given the opportunity to develop knowledge of living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket 2011c: 1) Reading authentic literature is an excellent way to fulfil that requirement.

1.2. Why teach *Boy meets boy*?

Literature is not only a source of entertainment and language enrichment; it is also a source of comfort and reassurance. That reassurance can, as Levithan (2004) notes, be especially valuable for questioning teenagers in search of their identity. Literature gives readers a chance to gain new perspectives and to experience alternative ways of living. The number of texts depicting lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer teenagers has grown substantially since the turn of the twenty-first century (Crisp 2009: 333). For this project I have chosen to work with *Boy meets boy* by David Levithan, a novel which was first published in 2003. The novel revolves around gay high school sophomore *Paul* and his circle of friends: *Infinite Darlene*, homecoming queen and star quarterback; *Tony*, Paul’s best friend; *Joni*, Paul’s other best friend; *Ted*, Joni’s ex-boyfriend; *Chuck*, Joni’s new boyfriend; *Kyle*, Paul’s sexually confused ex-boyfriend and *Noah*, the new boy in town. When Paul meets Noah he instantly falls in love. They start dating and everything seems to be going well when Kyle unexpectedly decides that he wants Paul back. Paul dismisses Kyle but still gives him a kiss, which Noah soon finds out about. Things suddenly get complicated, not only for Paul but also for his friends. Joni’s new relationship with Chuck is causing tension within Paul and Joni’s friendship and homosexual Tony, who lives in another town, is having a great deal of problems with his homophobic parents who think that he and Paul are a couple.

Boy meets boy is, all in all, a rather ordinary teenage romance novel. What makes the story special is the utopian setting, a place which could exist but has not yet been realized. The story takes place in a forward-thinking town where individual differences are embraced and where homo-, bi- and heterosexuality are considered equally “normal”. *Boy meets boy* is, as

Thomas Crisp (2009) points out, a novel with a mission: it wants to serve as a tool for activism. Levithan's use of a fictional but recognizable ideal society encourages the reader to re-imagine what normalcy means. The utopian setting and the absence of homophobia make heteronormativity visible (Pattee 2008: 168). What is more, in contrast to most other young adult LGBTQ novels, like Perry Moore's *Hero* (2007), Alex Sanchez's *Rainbow boys* (2001) Steve Berman's *Vintage: A ghost story* (2008) and Brent Hartinger's *Geography club* (2003), *Boy meets boy* does not rely on homophobia for drama. That absence of homophobia as a basis for realism is significant. As Crisp points out: "When the worlds within novels rely upon homophobia or homophobic discourse as a reactive contrast in order to create a 'realistic' feel, they reaffirm such problems as inevitable at best or worse 'natural'" (2009: 345).

Boy meets boy is thus an unusual novel within its genre. Heteronormativity is a powerful normative model which few texts manage to disrupt. *Boy meets boy* does that and can in consequence be of great use for teachers who want to teach norm critically about heteronormativity and homophobia. The level of the language is fairly uncomplicated, but because the novel deals with a subject that requires some maturity on the part of the readers it is probably best suited to teach at the upper secondary school, in English level 5.

1.3. A discussion of possible difficulties

Boy meets boy is in many respects quite innocuous; there is no sex, no drugs, no alcohol and no swearing in the story and nobody hurts themselves or others physically. It is however a story about gay love and that fact alone may cause some alarm. Parents may feel uncomfortable with their children reading a novel about a homosexual relationship and there may be a problem with insensitive and immature pupils. Some may think that the teacher is forcing values on the pupils, especially when the novel is taught norm critically. Some may even argue that teachers should not use norm critical pedagogy. All these objections must be considered and properly addressed. The project of teaching *Boy meets boy*, a novel which challenges heteronormativity and traditional gender roles, with norm critical pedagogy can of course seem controversial, but there is actually a great deal of support for such projects in the curriculums (Skolverket 2011a and 2011b) and the Education Act (SFS 2010:800). The curriculum for the upper secondary school clearly states that everyone who works in schools must "be observant and take the necessary steps to prevent and counteract all forms of discrimination, harassment and degrading treatment of individuals or groups" (Skolverket

2011a: 12, own translation). The curriculum further states that “the school shall actively and consciously further equal rights and opportunities for women and men. Pupils shall be encouraged to develop their interests without prejudice as to gender differences” (Skolverket 2011a: 6, own translation). Objections from parents should of course be taken seriously. The teacher needs to conduct a dialogue and listen to the parents, but should also stress that the curriculum and the Education Act actually require teachers to teach about equality and to combat discriminatory tendencies. It is actually part of the teacher’s profession to promote certain values. This responsibility is made clear and sanctioned in the Education Act, which stipulates that “education should impart and establish respect for human rights and the fundamental democratic values on which Swedish society is based” (SFS 2010:800, 4§). These fundamental values include equality between women and men and the equal value of all people. It is also worth mentioning that the Swedish National Agency for Education has made positive statements about norm critical pedagogy. The agency describes awareness of the importance of a norm critical perspective as fundamental to the work against discrimination and degrading treatment (Bromseth & Darj 2010: 286).

Even though there is a great deal of support for the teaching of *Boy meets boy* in the curriculums and the Education Act, it is also important to keep in mind that questions of sexuality and gender expressions are sensitive issues, especially for teenagers. Being called a poof is still one of the worst insults imaginable for a fifteen-year-old boy. Some pupils may not seem mature enough to discuss homosexuality. Gunilla Edemo and Joakim Rindå (2004), who educate teachers in norm critical pedagogy, note that teachers sometimes express a fear that their teaching will “provoke” homophobic utterances from immature and insensitive pupils. The fear is understandable, but must not be used as an excuse to refrain from teaching about gender and sexuality. A pupil who expresses homophobia in class is, as Edemo and Rindå point out, most likely expressing such opinions outside class as well. The key is, I believe, to treat pupils with respect and to encourage them to think for themselves, while still making clear that homophobia and intolerance are not accepted.

2. Theory

In this chapter I will briefly describe the theoretical starting points for this essay: queer theory and norm critical pedagogy. Norm critical pedagogy can, simply put, be described as an attempt to make practical use of queertheory.

2.1. Queer theory

The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism (2010) describes Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* as one of the most influential theoretical texts of the 1990s. It is furthermore described as one of the canonical texts of queer theory. In *Gender Trouble* (1999) Butler argues that gender is something we *do*, rather than something we *are*. In contrast to earlier canonical feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Butler questions the assumption that there is a distinction between (a biological) sex and a (culturally constructed) gender; they are both social constructions. Gender is furthermore seen as a cultural performance; much like actors perform a script people perform gender. Even though there is no core behind the act that expresses gender, the sheer reiteration of it creates a feeling of naturalness; genders seem natural because people constantly perform them. The act itself constitutes an illusion of a stable gender identity. Gender identities can thus be seen as a result of our actions. Butler (1999) refers to this as *gender performativity*. The theatrical aspect of gender is highlighted in drag performances. Drag queens are simply too feminine for it to seem natural. Butler argues that drag performances destabilize the distinction between the natural and the artificial: "Is drag the imitation of gender, or does it dramatize the signifying gestures through which gender itself is established?" (1999: xxviii). Drag thus brings into relief the idea that traditional gender roles are social constructs, one of many possible expressions of gender. This view of gender as performative opens up for change: if gender is a social construct dependent on constant repetition it must be changeable. The subversive process is, however, not an easy one. The discourse that supports the system permeates all dominant institutions of political and social life and norm breakers will be punished, ridiculed and shamed (Butler 2011: 181-183). The act of doing gender is thus clearly not one's act alone and one cannot achieve social change alone.

Sex/gender and desire are closely associated in today's society. Anatomical differences are linked to expectations about sexual desire. Gender discourses presuppose consistency between

the three aspects of sex, gender and desire. A person with two x-chromosomes is consequently expected to be feminine and desire men. If that person is not performing “feminine enough” she is assumed to be a lesbian (Butler 2011: 182). Butler refers to this system, where sex, gender and desire are assumed to be dependent on each other as the *heterosexual matrix* and *heteronormativity* (1999: Chapter 2).

2.2. Norm critical pedagogy

There are a number of pedagogical theories that focus on ways to deal with oppression and bullying in the educational system. Many of them, such as critical pedagogy and queer pedagogy, are closely related to each other. For the purpose of this essay I have chosen to focus on a Swedish variety called norm critical pedagogy², which, in contrast to critical pedagogy, has a clear focus on norms and their roles in the reproduction of hierarchies.

Norm critical pedagogy, as it is presented in Bromseth and Darj (2010), is clearly influenced by Kevin Kumashiro’s (2002) theory of antioppressive pedagogy. Kumashiro discerns four different ways to conceptualise and work against oppression: education for the Other³, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and Othering, and education that changes students and society (2002: 31). The first two are examples of what Bromseth and Darj critically refer to as “tolerance pedagogy” (2010: 35). Tolerance pedagogy focuses on the deviant, those whom Kumashiro refers to as the Other. The norm remains unquestioned, reinforced and naturalized, while the Other is reproduced as an Other, something else than the normal. Tolerance pedagogy can consequently be both harmful and counterproductive. In order to achieve true change we need to look at the norms, the power structures that sanction them and our own roles in that process. Who has preferential rights of interpretation and why? Power and knowledge are closely linked; what is considered true or normal has to do with power (Bromseth & Darj 2010: 40). The main goal for norm critical pedagogy is, simply put, to question, challenge and disrupt the binary of “us” and “them”, of “normal” and “deviant”.

² My translation from the Swedish “normkritisk pedagogik”.

³ Kumashiro uses the term Other to refer to “those groups that are traditionally marginalized, denigrated, or violated (i.e. Othered) in society. [...] They are often defined in opposition to groups traditionally favoured, normalized, or privileged in society, and as such, are defined as *other than* the idealized norm” (2002: 32). That is also the way I will use the term in this essay.

Norm critical pedagogy stresses the importance of keeping an intersectional perspective on questions of power. Categories of oppression, such as class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality, are all closely connected and interact with each other. The ways middle class girls perform femininity differ from the ways working class girls perform femininity. Different kinds of femininity also render different kinds of privileges and obstacles. It is therefore important to always take other aspects into consideration when dealing with one form of oppression (Bromseth & Darj 2010: 30).

3. Analysis

The syllabus for the subject of English (Skolverket 2011c) states five goals for the teaching of the subject: Pupils should develop their understanding of spoken and written English as well as their ability to express themselves in speech and writing. Pupils should be given the opportunity to develop “their ability to use different language strategies in different contexts”, “to adapt their language to different purposes, recipients and situations” and “to discuss and reflect on living conditions, social issues and cultural features in different contexts and parts of the world where English is used” (Skolverket 2011: 2). Teachers must take all five goals into consideration when making lesson plans. In this chapter I will show how I intend to teach *Boy meets boy* in a way that is norm critical and takes the goals of the syllabus into consideration. I will in the first section of the chapter, 3.1, describe the general lesson plan for the project. In the next section, 3.2, I will argue that Levithan’s book is suitable as a starting point for norm critical work. In the third section, 3.3, I will conduct a literary analysis and suggest possible ways to utilise that analysis in the classroom.

3.1. Teaching *Boy meets boy* in the language class room: a general lesson plan

The idea of reading an entire novel in a foreign language may seem daunting to some pupils. Even though as a fifteen-year-old pupil I was myself a frequent reader with a reasonably good ear for languages, I still remember feeling apprehensive when my English teacher gave me Bernard MacLaverty’s *Cal* and J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*. Reading an entire novel is, I believe, a project that must be allowed to take some time. It also requires a lot of planning. Proper teacher guidance can, I believe, make the project of reading a novel feel less daunting and more enriching.

I have estimated that the project of teaching *Boy meets boy* norm critically should take approximately six to ten weeks depending on the proficiency level in the class and the amounts of lesson hours available. The novel is around 210 pages long and can be divided into eight sections of twenty to thirty pages. Some parts may be read together in class, but pupils will also be asked to read quite a lot at home. Every section will, as Collie and Slater (2008) advocate, be accompanied with a worksheet that supports the home reading. The worksheets will have different focuses; some will be designed to raise questions or to help

pupils understand the text better while others focus on grammar and language. The inspiration comes from Collie and Slater, who introduce language teachers to a wide variety of different worksheets in their resource book of ideas and activities (2008: 38-51). I have been inspired by Tricia Hedge (2000) and the idea of a three-phase technique for teaching reading in a foreign language. The aim of the first phase, the pre-reading phase, is to establish a purpose for reading and to motivate pupils to read a specific text. The aim of the second phase, the while-reading phase, is to encourage pupils to be active readers. The aim of the third phase, the post-reading phase is to give pupils an opportunity to make use of what they have read in a meaningful way (Hedge 2000: 209-212). My teaching of *Boy meets boy* will take all three phases into consideration. Hedge, Collie and Slater also stress the importance of pre-reading activities:

Many learners fail to persevere with a book because they find the initial encounter simply too daunting. It may be that the first page is bristling with difficult words; or perhaps the territory they have wandered into seems so totally different from their own surroundings that they never quite succeed in identifying with it. (2008: 16)

The world described in *Boy meets boy* is, in many ways, utopian and can seem strange to pupils. It is however based on a setting which I believe most Swedish teenagers are familiar with, namely the world of an American high school. The high school milieu is the setting for numerous popular films and TV-series. Pupils are therefore often well acquainted with high school stereotypes such as the cheerleader, the geek, the jock and the class president. As a pre-reading activity I will therefore ask pupils to brainstorm about what they know of American high schools and what they have learned from TV-series and films. The idea is that pupils will get a chance to activate prior knowledge of the topic.

There is, as Hedge notes, little evidence of the effect of while reading activities. Many pupils do however report positively on the usefulness of such activities (Hedge 2000: 210). For this phase I will, as previously mentioned, use worksheets. The purpose of worksheets is to encourage pupils to interact with the text and to facilitate a deeper understanding. I will also introduce three norm critical speaking exercises. These exercises, which complement the reading, will be described in detail in 3.3. In the same section I will also introduce a writing exercise called “Re-write a classic fairytale”, which functions as a post-reading activity. Hedge argues that post-reading activities should tie up with the reading purpose set (2000:

211). In my case that purpose is to make pupils question norms and the binary of “us” and “them”, of “normal” and “deviant”. The exercise “re-write a classic fairytale” has an intersectional perspective and encourages pupils to question normalcy. It could thus be argued that it ties up with the reading purpose of the project.

3.2. *Boy meets boy* and norm critical pedagogy

The thesis claim of this essay is that the novel *Boy meets boy* can be a valuable resource and a suitable starting point for teachers who want to use norm critical pedagogy in the English language classroom. *Boy meets boy* challenges the reader’s assumptions of normalcy and can consequently, at least to some extent, be described as a norm critical text.

Norm critical pedagogy encourages teachers and students to question norms. Norms are usually taken for granted and can therefore be difficult to discern. The first step in any norm critical work is therefore to spot the norms and make them visible (Bromseth & Darj 2010: 287, 69). *Boy meets boy* can be a useful resource for such work since it disrupts heteronormativity, which makes norms on gender and sexuality visible (Pattee 2008).

Boy meets boy is a rather unusual text within its genre, young adult LGBTQ literature. In contrast to many other texts, like *Rainbow boys* (2001) or *Geography club* (2003), its plotline does not rely on homophobia. Certain characters, such as Ted, Chuck or Tony’s parents express homophobia, but it is not, as Crisp (2009) puts it “given the central role of the foil against which all the major characters are forced to react” (343). What is more, Levithan never allows the reader to view homo- and bisexuality as an Other to heterosexuality. Paul refuses to be seen as an Other and instead considers himself to be very normal and very ordinary (Levithan 2003: 23). That sets him apart from other main characters in LGBTQ novels. The main characters in *Rainbow boys* (2001), *Geography club* (2003), *Hero* (2007) and *Vintage: A ghost story* (2008) all describe themselves as outsiders. When Paul, his best friend Joni and two other gay kids form the elementary school’s first gay-straight alliance in sixth grade, it is not because the gay kids need any help or support⁴: “Quite honestly, we took one look around and figured the straight kids needed our help. For one thing, they were all wearing the same clothes. Also (and this was critical); they couldn’t dance to save their lives”

⁴ This is certainly the case in *Geography club* (2003) and *Rainbow boys* (2001)

(Levithan 2003: 22)⁵. Gay-straight alliances are usually assumed to be for the benefit of the gay kids, but Levithan effectively turns such expectations on their head. The norm is broken and made visible. *Boy meets boy* thus encourages readers to look at the norm instead of the Other, and, as Crisp (2009) puts it “de-centre privileged discourses and disrupt what may have previously been taken as ‘logical’ and ‘normal’” (340).

The Education Act (2010) and the curriculum for the upper secondary school (2011) both state that schools must actively work against discrimination. Little is said however about how that should be done. The idea that prejudices can be “cured” with information and counter-arguments is widespread in the educational system of today. Norm critical educationalist Gunilla Edemo (2010) is critical of that idea and argues that human beings need to categorise to function cognitively. That need cannot be cured and instead of rejecting all categorisation, which tolerance pedagogy⁶ encourages us to do, we should rethink the way we categorise. It is, as Edemo points out, imperative to remember to talk about those who are not subject to categorisation (the norm) and how that fact relates to power structures (2010: 103). *Boy meets boy* plays with categorisation and labelling in a way that can be described as norm critical. For instance, when Paul runs for class president he dismisses the slogan “Vote for me... I am a gay” because it could be misread as “Vote for me... I am a guy”, a slogan that he believes would certainly lose him votes (Levithan 2003: 21). Here Levithan clearly turns the tables: for a politician being a “guy” has historically been an asset, whereas being gay has not. Also, when Paul refers to (the closeted) Amber as an “Old Navy-wearing lesbian Club Kid” (Levithan 2003: 174), Amber does not have any problem with the label lesbian. It is the categorisation of her as a Club Kid⁷ that she resists:

Amber’s laugh stops. She looks around to see if anyone’s heard.

I’ve gone too far, I think.

‘I’m sorry’, I say.

Amber waves me off. ‘It’s OK. It’s just that I’m not... well I don’t like to think of myself as... a Club Kid’.

She smiles again.

‘I’ll never think of you that way again’, I promise.

‘I mean, I love joining clubs and all. I just don’t want word to get out, okay?’

⁵ It could be argued that this remark reflects a rather stereotypical view of queers as fashionable people who like to party and know how to dance.

⁶ See 2.2.

⁷ A Club Kid is someone who joins lots of clubs and performs every volunteer hour they can because it will look good on their college applications.

Her secret is safe with me. (Levithan 2003: 174)

Here Levithan does not only make the reader smile, but also think. The passage challenges the reader's assumptions about what should be kept a secret. What is assumed to be sensitive information is not and what is assumed to be non-sensitive information is (Wickens 2011:160).

Boy meets boy is, all in all, a suitable text to teach norm critically. It could however be argued that even if a text might be norm critical in itself, its subversive potential depends upon what we do with it. As Kevin Kumashiro (2002) notes, teachers need to have certain knowledge about oppression and power structures in order to teach norm critically. Reading a norm critical text without using it in a norm critical way is not enough and will not suffice. In the next chapter I will therefore introduce a few practical norm critical exercises that can complement the reading.

3.3. Themes for literary analysis and practical work in the classroom

In this section I will introduce three themes for literary analysis: gender performativity, sexuality and, finally, class and ethnicity. For each theme I will also suggest practical work for the language classroom.

3.3.1. Gender performativity

“This close, I can see through all her layers. Beneath the mascara and the lipstick and the chicken pox scar on her lower lip, beneath the girl and the boy to the person within”. (Levithan 2003: 131)

Boy meets boy (2003) is set in a town where the strict boundaries of traditional gender expressions have been dissolved. The characters perform gender in a variety of ways: there are feminine boys and masculine girls, as well as masculine boys and feminine girls. What is more, the characters seem to be allowed to be both feminine and masculine at the same time. Infinite Darlene is one of the best examples of this. She is both the star quarterback and the homecoming queen, she walks the hallways in high heels and “more-than-passable make-up”

(Levithan 2003: 25), but will sweat, grunt and break her nails on the field. Throughout the novel *Levithan* constantly mixes things perceived as masculine, such as motorcycles or football, with things perceived as feminine, such as cheerleaders and homecoming queens⁸. At the local video rental shop, there is a monitor solely devoted to Quentin Tarantino and Julie Andrews, a director known for violent action movies and an actress best known for musicals and romantic comedies. Paul remembers seeing a video of big hulking guys crying their eyes out over a dead friend and at the Homecoming Pride Parade Infinite Darlene “strides out in a pink ball gown, covered in part by her quarterback jersey” (Levithan 2003: 34). The constant mix of feminine and masculine expressions draws attention to and seems to support the idea that gendered expressions should not be seen as consequences of sex or biology but as social constructs. *Levithan* questions familiar stereotypes such as the jock or the cheerleader and highlights that gender is something we do, rather than something we are.

Boy meets boy can, as shown by the analysis, introduce young readers to a smorgåsbord of possible identities. The curriculum for the upper secondary school states that the school should encourage all pupils to find their own uniqueness as individuals. Reading *Boy meets boy* can help pupils to do that (Skolverket 2011a: 9). It can also give rise to and serve as an introduction to discussions on gender and equality. The syllabus for English level 5 states that students should learn strategies for contributing to and actively participating in discussions related to societal and working life (Skolverket 2011c). Questions of gender and equality are ever-present in the public debate and should thus be relevant topics to discuss. They are furthermore topics which everyone can relate to and have an opinion about. As Hedge (2000) points out, pupils can sometimes feel apprehensive or anxious about expressing opinions or ideas on a topic which is unfamiliar or which they have not discussed in their first language. Since questions of gender and equality are familiar topics that should not be a problem. The teacher should however keep in mind that questions of gender, especially in relation to sexuality, can be a sensitive topic for many people.

I have in this project found inspiration for practical classroom exercises in *Break the norm! A methodological material about norms in general and heteronormativity in particular*⁹ (2011). The material contains several classroom exercises on the theme of gender and equality and I have chosen to work with one called “The Frames” (25-27). The purpose of the exercise, as it is described by Nordberg and Rindå, is to make visible norms about how

⁸ The cheerleaders in Paul’s school ride Harleys and do formations with their motorcycles instead of doing a traditional pom-pom routine (Levithan 2003: 33).

⁹ My translation from Swedish *Bryt! Ett metodmaterial om normer i allmänhet och heteronormen i synnerhet*.

society expects girls and boys to act and look. Slightly altered it can also function as a speaking exercise for the language classroom. It is important to take some time to define and translate important words and concepts such as masculinity, femininity, society, gender and norms. It can also be a good idea to, as Hedge (2000: 277) suggests, add some quiet time for individual brainstorming on the topic, in order to respect that some pupils need to think a little more before giving an opinion.

When introducing the exercise the teacher will draw two large frames (squares) on the whiteboard. The frames symbolize the boundaries and norms that restrict how girls on the one hand and boys on the other should act and look in order to fit into society. The teacher should then divide the class into groups of four or five pupils and introduce the questions for discussion:

- In society today, what do you think is considered masculine? What is considered feminine?
- How does society expect girls and boys to act and look?
- How does society expect women and men to act and look?
- Think of a masculine person and a feminine person. What are they like? What do they do for a living? What do they eat and what do they do in their spare time?
- What happens if a person does not act the way society expects them to, if a boy or a man acts and looks feminine and vice versa?

When the pupils have discussed the questions for a while they will be asked to fill in the frames with words from their discussion. Words associated with boys, men and masculinity should be written in one frame and words associated with girls, women and femininity in the other. The words in the frames will then form the basis for a new discussion:

- What do you think when you see all the words together?
- Is it possible to live up to all the words?
- Words and qualities associated with boys and men are often valued higher than words and qualities associated with girls and women. Why is that?

At the end of the lesson the lines between the frames can be erased, to show pupils that they can do and be anything, regardless of their gender.

3.3.2. Sexuality

The town where *Boy meets boy* is set can be described as a queer utopia. It is a place with virtually no homophobia, a place where the “Boy Scouts” changed their name to the “Joy scouts” because “when the Boy Scouts decided gay had no place in their ranks, our Scouts decided the organisation had no place in our town” (Levithan 2003: 84). This section is divided into two parts, 3.3.2.1 “Heteronormativity and labelling” and 3.3.2.2 “Sexual identities”.

3.3.2.1. Heteronormativity and labelling

Heteronormativity assumes close links between gender and sexuality: people who perform femininity are expected to desire people who perform masculinity. Those who do not fit or refuse to fit into this order are silenced or made invisible (Crisp 2009: 335). In *Boy meets boy* this model is disrupted (Crisp 2009; Wickens 2011; Pattee 2008). Levithan does not only give LGBTQ teens a voice but makes the reader question his or her assumptions of what normalcy means. That is also one of the main objectives for norm critical pedagogy. Fifteen-year-old Paul describes his younger years as rather ordinary, with “the usual series of crushes, confusions and intensities” (Levithan 2003: 23). He tells the readers stories of friendships and love, of childhood flirtations and teenage heartbreaks. He talks about school dances and class president elections. It would all seem very ordinary if it was not for the fact that he is gay. According to heteronormativity being gay equals being extraordinary, different, an Other. Young adult LGBTQ literature tends to reflect that idea; Thom in *Hero*, Nelson, Jason and Kyle in *Rainbow boys* and Russel in *Geography club* all describe themselves as being different. To them being gay or being different is seen as a negative thing, but for Paul it was never a problem or even a big deal:

I’ve always known I was gay, but it wasn’t confirmed until I was in kindergarten.

It was my teacher who said so. It was right there on my kindergarten report card: PAUL IS DEFINITELY GAY AND HAS A VERY GOOD SENSE OF SELF.

I saw it on her desk one day before nap-time. And I have to admit: I might not have realised I was different if Mrs Benchly hadn’t pointed it out. I mean, I was five years old. I just assumed boys were attracted to other boys. Why else would they spend all of their time together, playing on teams and making fun of the girls? I was still unclear how girls fit into the picture but I thought I knew the boy thing A-OK.

Imagine my surprise when I went through all the other reports and found out that not one of the other boys had been labelled DEFINITELY GAY

[...]

Mrs Benchley explained a little more to me – the whole boys-liking-girls thing. I can't say I understood. Mrs Benchley asked me if I'd noticed that marriages were mostly made up of men and women. I had never really thought of marriages as things that involved liking. I had just assumed this man-woman arrangement was yet another adult quirk, like flossing. Now Mrs Benchley was telling me something much bigger. Some sort of silly global conspiracy¹⁰.

“But that's not how I feel,” I protested. [...] “How I feel is what's right... right?”

“For you, yes”, Mrs Benchley told me. “What you feel is absolutely right for you. Always remember that”. (Levithan 2003: 17-18)

The humorous likening of heteronormativity to flossing is rather disarming. Like flossing heterosexuality is neither normal nor abnormal, it is one way to do something, one way to keep your teeth clean or one way to form a family. In the excerpt Paul admits that he might not have realised he was different if Mrs Benchley had not pointed it out. The fact that Mrs Benchley felt the need to categorise and label her kindergarten pupils seems somewhat questionable. On the one hand it could be seen as unethical: children should not be subject to such labelling. On the other hand, however, it turns everything on its head. Small children are constantly assumed to be heterosexual. Friends who have children the same age might say things like “Oh look how cute Kate and Jack are when they play together! Maybe they will get married when they grow up”. Mrs Benchley's comment could be seen as a play on such heteronormative assumptions.

In her analysis of *Boy meets boy*, Wickens (2011) argues that Levithan has the ability to make the ordinary seem extraordinary and the extraordinary seem ordinary (157). The passage quoted above constitutes a good example of that ability and is, together with the section about Amber mentioned in 3.2 (Levithan 2003: 174), suitable to use as a starting point for a norm critical discussion on labelling and categorisation. Why did Mrs Benchley feel the need to label Paul gay? What does that say about Mrs Benchley and Paul? How do labels affect the way we perceive people? The speaking exercise “What is your label?” is designed to make pupils think about labels, norms and power structures (Nordberg & Rindå 2011: 86-89). The goal of the exercise is to make norms visible and to make pupils more aware of the way we all categorise and label people. The exercise begins with the teacher handing out sheets of papers

¹⁰ The description “silly global conspiracy” could be seen as a reference to heteronormativity.

to the pupils. The teacher will tell the pupils to write down a label that they think others put on them at first glance, when they get on a bus or a tram or on the first day in a new class at school. The labels can be general ones like “girl” or “tall” or more specific ones like “geek” or “skater boy”. When everyone has written a label on their paper the teacher will collect the notes and put them on the whiteboard. The teacher will then put each label on her or himself and ask the pupils to think about that label. Is it positive or negative and what assumptions do we make about a person with that label? How do you react if you meet a person with that label? How do others react? An important part of the exercise is to make pupils think about the labels we rarely put on people. Why did not the presumably heterosexual pupils get any label from Mrs Benchley? Why is it that white people in Sweden rarely get labelled based on ethnicity or skin colour? People who fit into the norm are simply much less frequently subjected to categorisation; it is for instance more common to talk about lesbians as a group than to talk about heterosexual girls as a group (Nordberg & Rindå 2011: 7). It is important to keep that in mind in order to keep the exercise norm critical.

3.3.2.2. Sexual identities

Paul’s sexuality is consistent throughout the novel. He is from a very young age assumed by others, such as Mrs Benchley, as well as himself to only like boys. Paul even states that he is “wired to like boys” (Levithan 2003:108), a statement which, I would argue, suggests that he sees his sexuality as a consequence of biology and thus as both natural and invariable. Paul’s sexuality is seen as static and fixed and the idea that he could possibly desire girls as well as boys is seen as not only unlikely but almost impossible. Kyle, on the other hand, does not know who he is and finds it difficult being neither gay nor straight:

“‘I am so confused’.

‘Why?’

‘I still like girls.’

‘So?’

‘And I also like guys’

I touch his knee. ‘It doesn’t sound like you’re confused then.’

‘But I wanted to be one or the other. With you I just wanted to like you. Then, after you, I wanted to just like the girls. But every time I’m with one, I think the other’s possible’”.

(Levithan 2003: 107)

Kyle represents a character I believe many young adults can identify with: the questioning teen who does not quite know who he is but is constantly searching for his identity. Throughout the novel he changes and evolves: he goes from heterosexual to questioning to homosexual to questioning. He is, I would argue, one of the most well-rounded and relatable characters of the novel. He is however not the only character with a more fluid sexuality¹¹. Previous to his relationship with Joni, Chuck desired Infinite Darlene, whom he refers to as “he”, and Ted flirts with both heterosexual Theresa and queer hockey player Trilby Pope. Kyle, Chuck and Ted are, unlike Paul but like so many other teenagers, still searching for their sexual identities. The three of them are rather disparate characters, which makes their stories apposite to use as a backdrop for classroom discussions about heteronormativity, sexuality and identity.

The school’s teaching about sexual orientation and gender often focuses on those who are not heterosexual. Someone from RFSL, the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people’s rights, might come and visit school to talk about their experiences of being gay, bi- or transsexual. Focus is on the Other and heteronormativity remains unquestioned. The exercise “Guess who is straight” from *Break the norm!* (2011) turns the tables and makes the participant focus on heteronormativity. The purpose of the exercise is to discern heteronormativity by making visible prejudices and norms surrounding sexuality. It can also function as a speaking exercise for the English language classroom. The methodological material *Break the norm!* contains thirteen pictures of different people. The individuals in the pictures are of different ages, ethnicities, gender and social classes. Some have visible disabilities and some do not. The teacher should show the class all thirteen pictures and ask pupils to individually choose the one picture they think shows a heterosexual person. The question, which should be written down on the whiteboard, is: “who do you think is heterosexual and what makes you think so?”. That question can possibly cause some confusion. Can you really determine if someone is heterosexual just by looking at a picture of them? The teacher should then stress that even though we probably cannot we still do; people who diverge from gender norms are often assumed to be gay (Bromseth & Darj 2010). When everyone has made their choice the pupils should be asked to write down some of the words and criteria they use to explain their choice on the whiteboard. Because heteronormativity assumes close links between gender expressions and sexuality pupils will most likely write

¹¹ The expression “fluid sexuality” refers to a sexuality that is not fixed or innate but changes during a person’s lifetime (Kumashiro 2002: 4).

down words that relate to femininity and masculinity, like “macho” or “wears make-up” (Bromseth & Darj: 2010: 131). The words on the whiteboard will then form the basis for a new discussion on norms and sexuality. The questions, which must be properly explained, are:

- How do norms around masculinity and femininity affect the way we perceive an individual’s sexuality?
- The individuals on the pictures are of different colours, have different religious beliefs, abilities and disabilities and belong to different social classes. How does that affect your perception of who is heterosexual?

It is often easier to talk about the Other rather than the norm. Pupils may consequently find it easier to define what heterosexuality is not rather than what it is. As a teacher it is then important to keep a rather tight grip on the discussion and steer the conversation back to the original question. Talking about the Other instead of the norm makes the norm seem normal and neutral.

3.3.3 What about class and ethnicity?

As I hope the analysis so far has shown, *Boy meets boy* is remarkably well suited to use as a starting point for norm critical discussions about gender and sexuality. It could even be argued that the whole novel is crafted to disrupt normative assumptions on gender and sexuality (Wickens 2011: 149). The author, Levithan, has in an interview stated that he did not want to reflect reality, but create it (Pattee 2008: 168). The reality he created is in many senses utopian and subversive, but also (upper) middle class and presumably white. Categories of oppression, like gender, sexuality, ethnicity and social class all interact and may reinforce each other. It is therefore important to always keep all categories in mind when teaching about one of them. Even if *Boy meets boy* disrupts normative assumptions about gender and sexuality, it might simultaneously reinforce normative assumptions about class and ethnicity. It seems, for instance, almost impossible to be both gay and Christian. In terms of class, everyone in the story seems to be reasonably well off financially: Paul’s mother is a dentist and his father is “the director of philanthropy” at a national toiletries chain, Tony is described as a middle class suburban kid and Noah’s parents spend most of their time in the commander’s club’s lounge at various airports. No one seems to be struggling with money. Even the janitors at high school are day-trading millionaires, who “could have retired long

ago, but they all have a compulsion to clean schools” (Levithan 2003: 126). Paul’s description of the janitor’s “compulsion” to clean schools reflects a naïve and very individualistic approach to class issues, an approach which, I would argue, permeates the entire story. In terms of ethnicity, Levithan never really says anything about the ethnicity of his characters. The lack of such descriptions does however suggest that they are, like Levithan himself, white. In *On power and sexuality*, Alan Sinfield (2004) describes the characters in a short story as “presumably white” (143). I find that expression useful and important since it indicates that a character is assumed to be white until proven differently, much like the concept of heteronormativity states that individuals are assumed to be heterosexual until proven differently. When ethnicity is seen as a non-issue or as insignificant that usually means that the norm is white and that whiteness renders privileges. The importance of ethnicity is thus downplayed in *Boy meets boy*. Religion, which is sometimes seen as part of ethnicity, does however play an important role. Tony’s parents are devoted Christians and very much against homosexuality. Their intolerance provides both drama and some kind of comic relief. For instance, when Tony’s mother, who suspects that Tony and Paul are a couple, hangs up the telephone on Paul, he notes that she was “muttering something about the devil’s influence, which I think was a little overstated” (Levithan 2003: 125). Religion is throughout the novel portrayed as reactionary and intolerant. On the very first page Paul argues that it does not matter which religion, “few of them want a gay boy cruising around with his friends on a Saturday night” (Levithan 2003: 9). Secularity is thus seen as condition for equality. I find that idea, that homophobia is caused by religion, quite problematic since it allows us to place the problem of homophobia and heteronormativity elsewhere, instead of recognizing that all societies are heteronormative. Racist groups often use similar arguments against Muslim immigrants; Islam is described as an innately homophobic and misogynistic religion, which is why Muslim immigration should be restricted.¹² Such arguments must always be questioned and countered. It is important to remember and stress that even though Sweden is a secularised country homophobia and heteronormativity still exist here.

Intersectionality is a crucial part of norm critical pedagogy (Bromseth & Darj 2010: 45). *Boy meets boy* provides plenty of opportunities to discuss gender and sexuality, but lacks an intersectional perspective. When teaching the novel norm critically the teacher must therefore make sure to pose questions about class, ethnicity and dis/abilities. The exercise that accompanies the analysis in this chapter is designed to make pupils question all norms, not

¹² English Defence League is a good example. They have an LGBT division, claim to be pro-homosexuality and argue that Islam is dangerous to LGBT people (Verkaik 2010).

only norms regarding gender and sexuality. It requires some basic awareness of norms and power structures and should be introduced towards the end of the novel, possibly as a final assignment. In this exercise the pupils should be divided into four groups. Each group is given a short adaptation of a classic fairytale, either *Cinderella*, *Snow-white*, *Sleeping beauty* or *Beauty and the beast*. They are then asked to individually re-write the story. The idea is that the pupils should make significant changes while still sticking to the original plot of the fairy tale. Maybe the prince in *Sleeping beauty* is not a prince but the son of a farmer. What if the beast in *Beauty and the beast* is a girl or if Snow-white is blind? How would that change the story and the way we perceive it? When everyone has re-written a story, the pupils should exchange stories with someone from another group, who then reads their story and gives them feedback on how their alteration changed the story.

This exercise gives pupils quite a lot of creative freedom. That kind of freedom can be both exciting and daunting. It is therefore, I would argue, worth spending some time going through the instructions together so that pupils are well aware of what is expected of them. A sheet of questions to consider during the reading and writing can make the writing process easier.

4. Conclusion and final reflections

The Swedish curriculums state that schools must counteract all forms of intolerance and discriminatory tendencies. There are a number of pedagogical theories that focus on ways to deal with oppression and bullying. This essay has argued for the benefits of norm critical pedagogy, a pedagogy which focuses on norms and the power structures that sanction them. Some may, as Kumashiro (2002) notes, argue that teaching norm critically and teaching about oppression takes time away from the real purpose of school, to teach knowledge. The aim of this essay has therefore been to show how English as a second language can be taught norm critically in a way that takes all the goals of the syllabus into consideration. The pupils will also practice their abilities to write, read, listen and speak while thinking about issues of oppression.

The thesis statement for this essay is that David Levithan's novel *Boy meets boy* can provide a valuable resource for teachers who want to teach norm critically. Since norms are usually taken for granted they become invisible and the first step in any norm critical work is therefore to discern the norm. *Boy meets boy* can help pupils discover norms surrounding gender and sexuality. Levithan also makes readers question assumptions of normalcy. Common presumptions are turned on their head. For instance, when Paul and his friend form a gay-straight alliance in their school, it is not primarily because the gay kids need any help or support, but because the straight kids do not know how to dance. When Paul's friend Amber objects to being called a "lesbian club kid", it is not because she finds the label lesbian problematic, but because she does not want to think of herself as a "club kid", someone who joins a lot of clubs in high school because it will look good on their college application.

Boy meets boy is, as I hope this essay has shown, remarkably apposite to use as a starting point for norm critical discussions about gender and sexuality. It is however not as well suited to use for discussions about social class, ethnicity or dis/abilities. Norm critical pedagogy stresses the importance of an intersectional perspective, something that *Boy meets boy* lacks and which the teachers must compensate for. The novel is remarkably white and middle class. It could also be argued that it is somewhat androcentric. The main characters are all boys. There is one important female character, Joni, but she does not seem to have any real agency. Paul describes her as a person who is lacking in independence. He frequently assumes that what she feels is a mere reflection of what her boyfriend feels (Levithan 2003: 113, 241). It could be argued that even though *Boy meets boy* challenges and questions hegemonic masculinity, hegemonic femininity remains surprisingly unquestioned. Paul mentions that the

cheerleaders drive motorcycles instead of waving pompoms, but apart from that, very little is said about different expressions of femininity. Levithan describes a variety of ways of being masculine, but does not show the same range when it comes to feminine expressions. That could however be explained by the shortage of important female characters in the story.

Boy meets boy is, in conclusion, an unusual book which could initiate interesting and important discussions about gender and sexuality. It is however, as mentioned in 3.3.3, important to remember those whose voices are not heard. As Kumashiro states:

Any given text will reflect the realities of some people but miss those of others; will represent the voices of some groups but silence those of others; and as a result will challenge some stereotypes while reinforcing others. [...] The unsaid is what gives the said its meaning. (2002: 61)

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