COC Workshop at Montessori High School
13 December 2018

We had multiple activities planned for the week that the Italians stayed with us in Leeuwarden, the COC workshop being one of them. First you should know that COC Nederland is an organization that advocates for the rights and safety of LGBTQ+ and other things like emancipation and self-acceptance. They have establishments all over the Netherlands with safe spaces for LGBTQ+ members to meet and they enable open conversations in schools.

So now it was our turn to be educated about sexualities and the gender spectrum.

Not everyone was really comfortable with having this conversation, but the two workshop presenters were expecting that, so we started with a welcoming game.

The objective of the game was to stand up when a statement related to you. The statements varied from "*I ate breakfast this morning*" to "*I have felt different in my life*". It was clear to see which statements made people feel a bit uncomfortable as some shifted a bit nervously in their chairs, and fewer people stood up. Some outcomes were interesting, like when the statement "*I have bought condoms in my life*" was said, and people started giggling when two boys stood up, one muttering that it wasn't for him, which made it clear that this kind of thing isn't really talked about. Another instant was when one of us stood up after one of them said "*I've had feelings for girl*". People are surprised, which they always seem to be. After all that, they asked if any of us were ashamed for standing up, and if so, why.

Then they started to ask us more questions, like if we knew what LGBTQ+ meant, if we knew famous persons that were gay, what our opinion was about the issue and how our communities thought about it. The Italians told us that when people came out the reactions could range from being reluctantly accepted, to being ignored and even being excluded from family and/or friends. In the Netherlands, it's different; here we are more accepting and supporting, in general that is. There are always going to be places where it is frowned upon.

They asked us what came to mind when we thought about the stereotypes, and if some of them were true. People knew a lot of stereotypes of the gay and lesbian part of the community (for lesbians it was things like short hair and checkered blouses, and a feminine voice and walk were the signs someone was gay) but the wells in our mind ran dry when we thought of the stereotypes of bisexuals and transgenders and such (turns out hair cut between your ears and shoulders is "*very bisexual*"). We were quick to speak when asked about it directly, but when we were asked to match the stereotypes to them (the presenters), the group seemed more hesitant, scared to hurt their feelings.

Now it was time for the real deal. We were split into groups of four and were told to talk about coming out, if we'd be safe to do so, and what the reactions would be.

We had to imagine three situations; coming out at school, to our parents and to our friends. Would we be accepted or thought about differently? Would we be scared, or would we trust that it'd be okay? When we were gone talking in our groups, we discussed the results with the rest. It turned out that most of us would be accepted, at school and at home. Weird looks could be expected, but nothing bad. Some were less lucky, but that could vary from just plain tension to possible gay-conversion.

The workshop ended with us asking the two spokespersons questions.

Some were about the acceptance of LGBTQ+ in Leeuwarden (it's there, but it could be (even) better), whether it is possible for gays to adopt a child? There were also the questions about their personal experiences. "*How did you find out that you're gay*?" and "*What was your worst experience with homophobia?*" But there was also the more positive one, "*What was your best experience?*"

We learned that homophobia is everywhere, and the only solution is to educate those who hate out of fear for the unknown, and the ones who hide behind their religion. Religion should be based on love, not hate.