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Learning Issues of Sexuality, Race, and Power in the Classroom

Loshini Naidoo Ph.D.
l.naidoo@uws.edu.au

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Dr. Loshini Naidoo

School of Education

University of Western Sydney

Abstract

The notion that all people should have equal access to human rights, dignity, protection, and opportunities, contextualizes the problems of sexual diversity in a wide range of discourses that marginalize those bodies, or individuals that are perceived to be sexually alternative. 'Gay, lesbian, bisexual, homosexual, and transgendered students, who do not identify with heterosexual norms are often ostracized, harassed, and excluded from and within the educational safety net, and feel betrayed by a system that positions the 'other' as deviant (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004). In view of current socio-cultural contexts, sexuality, figures into the milieu as a critical location of social injustice issues.

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The discourse of sexuality can be perceived as a tension between the acceptances, or affirmation of diversity and multi-sexuality, on one hand, and the defense of established beliefs and norms associated with dominant heterosexual values, on the other. At issue, the difference between deviant and normal sexual behaviour is contested, as perceptions of sexuality shift in the wake of contemporary global, 'socio-cultural-sexual realities' (Rosenthal & Dowsett, 2000).

Respectfully, the education system is concerned with social justice, and seeks to deal with the negativity associated with discrimination and disadvantage. Inclusively, some of those discourses, such as sexual harassment and violence, heterosexual discourse, homophobia, alcohol and drug abuse, depression, identity, coming out as a 'zone of shame and exclusion', sexual health, name calling, hate crimes, and assimilation, are at issue (Rasmussen, 2004; Graziano, 2003; Rosenthal & Dowsett, 2000;

Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Lugg, 2003; Davis & Lee, 1996). This paper will focus on a number of dominant discourses in relation to a constructive understanding of contemporary sexuality/education theories that offer strategies of empowerment for 'others'. Since there is no single theory that successfully incorporates all aspects needed to examine sexuality, wholly, this emphasis will framework a blend of critical theories that deal with power, Queer Theory, and race, which also provide useful strategies for teachers in addressing and countering pedagogical, curriculum, and whole school issues. Although, race may be construed as a discourse outside the sphere of sexuality it is significantly relevant in terms of a multisexual multicultural society, and therefore cannot be overlooked (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1999; Reid-Pharr, 2002; Rasmussen, 2004).

Sexuality cannot be fully considered without the awareness of power, and how it works within the school environment, for, and on behalf of students. The biological determined theory, which views sexuality as a binary distinction between males and females, espouses an essentialist notion that sexuality is fixed, 'anatomical' and immutable, and therefore, subject to powers of heterosexual patriarchal dominance, borne to a large extent by institutions that hierarchically advantage heterosexual behaviours (Bennett & Royle, 1999; Hall, 2003). Heterosexual norms are reinforced with privilege and therefore, any claims to a non- heterosexual identity are often stigmatized and compromised by a lack of acceptance and understanding, despite legal and liberating precedents that have been adjudicated by Western legislative democracies to recognize and empower sexual minorities (Lugg, 2003). Thus at the macro level, power is distributed in measure to the reinforcement of heterosexuality as the legitimate and natural arrangement of social order. Such prejudice means that homosexual students are essentially underrepresented and left out, or at least, find that they are subordinate in the power structure. For example, a school that engages in a biased heterosexual curriculum, risks alienating those who do not fit in the dialogue. Their experience is invalidated, and their lack of power to participate and be accepted unwillingly marginalizes them outside the notion of citizenship.

Poststructuralists, such as Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci (Reid-Pharr, 2002) criticise the essentialist theory of power on the basis that human sexuality has been socially and historically constructed along the binaries of normal and deviant behaviours, and are therefore open to reconstruction. This has yielded to an understanding that power over children has been socially constructed according to adult, and adult institutionalised orientations (Denborough, 1996). Non-adults are relegated to a relatively powerless situation that is demonstrated through varying adult degrees of authority, supervision and surveillance. Young people's sexuality is more or less defined in absence of their own sense of experience and commentary. Sexuality becomes a means for students to resist adult power and exercise their own powers, where sexual survival in an adult world is at stake (Denborough, 1996). Moreover, power is perceived to be exercised and not possessed (Kenway, Blackmore & Rennie, 1997). The politics of sexuality, therefore, should be understood as a ubiquitous power that challenges the notion of monopoly, for any particular entity, or representation.

Teachers, in particular, should be aware of the micro limitations that pedagogy and curriculum have in dealing with socio-sexuality justice issues, and listen more to what students have to offer. If students are allowed to partnership with adults in the collective empowerment process, and question the power issue, then a number of obstacles in negotiating heterosexual curriculum with gay and lesbian content, for example, could potentially lead to positive social justice outcomes, because most students will assume responsibility for their own conduct under those conditions.

Various theories, such as Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory, have been developed in response to poststructuralist and neo-Marxist theories, and global changes relative to contemporized perceptions of sexuality. Queer Theory rejects the feminist essentialist notions of 'desexualising', and 'assimilation', as well as the notion of 'heteronormativity', which is institutionalised, heterosexual power, articulated in terms of white legitimized dominion and power (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Hall, 2003). Queer Theory does not label gays and lesbians as such. Rather, it posits all sexualities, which

include bisexuals and transgenders, into the encompassing category of 'queer' (Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Hall, 2003; Lugg, 2003). Such a view underpins and eliminates all other theories that reproduce heterosexual values.

Queer Theory fails, however, to consider factors of 'multidimensionality' and 'intersectionality' that challenge minority ethnic groups. 'Multidimensionality' means that an individual has a multiple identity. A person has a sexuality, a class, and an ethnicity, for example. 'Intersectionality' is a recognition that race and sex are connected (Lugg, 2003; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1999). Understandably, a number of critics (Lugg, 2003; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1999; Loutzenheiser & MacIntosh, 2004; Reid-Pharr, 2002) have recommended that race theory be interwoven with Queer Theory. Critical Race Theory, which is more action oriented, and responds well to this challenge because of its empowering interpretation of ethnicity and class. Illustratively, 'Asian immigrants experience race precisely as a function of sexuality' quite differently to white ethnic groups (Reid-Pharr, 2002). Therefore, a framework that incorporates both Queer Theory and Critical Race Theory would be beneficial in deconstructing sexuality justice issues in the multicultural milieu.

Educators, who employ this theoretical framework are better able to strategise and respond with positive solutions to pedagogical and curriculum issues. The issue of social isolation and shame impacts on many homosexuals. If teachers presented non-heterosexual role models, and provided access to more accurate information on sexuality then homosexual students might be less inclined to believe they are alone in their suffering (Graziano, 2003; Lugg, 2003). There is a need to access broad community support in attaining funding for this.

Derogatory slurs and remarks, such as 'that's so gay' and 'faggot' can be addressed by teachers calling for a stop to its usage, and by dialogically examining the origins of those names in the context of rich historical meanings (Graziano, 2003; Lugg, 2003; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1999). Importantly, homosexual students need to see themselves in the curriculum and textbooks in a positive way.

Pedagogy can allow for critical discussion on issues of homophobia, race, and how power functions, for example. By providing insight into the power of institutions, such as the education system, and of those who develop and publish curriculum and textbooks, often exclusionary of homosexual material, will show not only support, but facilitate the notion of acceptance and self-worth, which is so imperative for homosexuals to feel (Graziano, 2003; Lugg, 2003; Rasmussen, 2004). Students need to get the message that their sexuality is okay, whatever that may be, and that they are valued in society.

Schools also need to be safe havens, free of harassment, assault and violence, and teachers have a vital role in educating students in what constitutes sexual harassment (Davis & Lee, 1996). Victims need protection, and knowledge of how myths about assault get circulated and reinforced, as well.

Attitudes by the educators themselves, is part of the problem. Limited understandings of sexuality issues and negative biases toward heterosexual norms are often communicated in deft ways (Graziano, 2003; Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1999). Therefore, teachers should be encouraged to take professional courses that deal with sexuality, especially with the more complex issues of 'coming out' (Rasmussen, 2004), ethnicity, race, and multicultural multidimensionality. In short, teachers must learn to overcome any of their prejudices and irrational fears that may prevent them from looking after the well-being of their students.

In summary, teachers need to skilled, trained and educated in sexuality discourse in order to be effective social justice actualisers. It has been demonstrated that dedication to awareness is insufficient, alone, but also that knowledge and support for homosexual students must be stressed in terms of acceptance and self–worth. The task of improving people's lives can not be achieved properly without empowerment, and it is very much in student interests to have power over their lives. Teachers and schools can make a difference for those that are marginalized, by approaching pedagogy and curriculum issues. Power Theory, Queer Theory, and Critical Race Theory, are some of the available, positive, and

constructive tools that enable critical deconstruction and strategy for many social justice issues regarding homophobia and sexuality. The challenge for teachers rests in their humanity.

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