



Countering heteronormativity and cisnormativity in Australian schools: Examining English teachers' reflections on gender and sexual diversity in the classroom

Wendy M. Cumming-Potvin ^{a, *}, Wayne Martino ^b

^a Murdoch University, WA, Australia

^b University of Western Ontario, Canada

HIGHLIGHTS

- Generating understandings to combat cisnormativity and heteronormativity.
- Examining teachers' reflections about LGBTQI issues, curriculum and literacy.
- Presenting a Bakhtian/Foucauldian model to reveal teacher discourses.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 30 March 2018

Accepted 7 April 2018

ABSTRACT

Examining the voices of English teachers regarding the extent to which Australian high schools are providing inclusive environments, this paper aims to generate deeper understandings about countering cisnormativity and heteronormativity. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted in Western Australia, the theoretical framework meshes the lenses of Bakhtin (1981) and Foucault (1995) to create an emergent model, integrating concepts such as the panoptic surveillance, dialogic utterances and heteroglossic language. Results reveal how teacher discourses concerning the provision of LGBTQI curriculum and resources, link to networks of power, and are imbued with a multiplicity of patterns, tensions and contradictions.

© 2018 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and significant progress in the Western World towards equality for people of diverse genders and sexualities, the struggle against discrimination, homophobia and transphobia remains intense and is often anchored in a plethora of complex and competing discourses (Ferfolja, 2015; McGregor, 2008; Nash & Browne, 2015; Rayside, 2008). Both in Australia and internationally, multiple examples illustrate how achievements for LGBTQI human rights have been obscured through resistance or ambiguity towards educational, social or legal reforms. When Barack Obama's Department of Education announced federal anti-discriminatory legislation to protect the rights of transgender students to affirm their gender

identity with respect to toilet usage, media reports of America's "profound gender anxiety" (Green, 2016, p. 2) overshadowed reforms, as numerous states announced their defiance of federal government directives (Redden, 2016). In Australia, Commonwealth reforms have arguably reduced discrimination against same-sex couples in areas such as superannuation, social security, taxation and child support (Australian Government, 2008). Although legislation for marriage equality was recently passed in the Australian parliament, many LGBTQI¹ identifying individuals continue to face high degrees of interpersonal and institutional discrimination, especially in education and healthcare.

Our focus in this paper is on the Western Australian context.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: w.cumming-potvin@murdoch.edu.au (W.M. Cumming-Potvin), wmartino@uwo.ca (W. Martino).

¹ The term LGBTQI refers to the community of individuals identifying as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Questioning and/or Intersex. More broadly, the term may also refer to friends or allies of individuals identifying with the LGBTQI community. It is acknowledged that terminology with reference to this community is contested and the community itself is heterogeneous.

While the WA School Education Act (1999) clearly stipulates that government schools must provide for the ‘educational needs of all children’ (p.2), there is no specific reference to addressing the needs of LGBTQI students or their representation in the curriculum. Parallel to WA and national curricula, numerous government and community organizations have made concerted efforts over many years to implement equity reform for diversity of gender and sexuality, suggesting that local educational discourses cannot be viewed as passive (Thompson, Renshaw, & Mockler, 2015). Despite the democratic intentions underpinning local organizations, factors such as restricted funding and resources, exemplify how the politics of gender and sexuality evolve under complex and contested social regimes and hierarchies (Butler, 1990; Connell & Pearse, 2015). As per Connell (2011), a societal project of moving towards gender democratization requires, both locally and globally, a long-term re-balancing of power, at the institutional and individual levels. Nonetheless, this local work in WA is testimony to many emerging educational sites, whereby stakeholders contribute democratically to disrupting oppression through nuanced pedagogy, which acknowledges intersections between race, class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality (Ferfolja, Criss Jones & Ullman, 2015).

Central to this policy ‘dispositif’ (Bailey, 2013) is an understanding about the role of the Safe Schools Coalition in the provision of safe and inclusive schools, specifically for programming and professional development around gender and sexual diversity. Rather than relegating responsibilities and resources to Education Departments themselves for such provision, the federal government funded the Safe Schools Coalition to undertake this role, thereby allowing schools to opt in or out of such professional development. In this way, responsibility is shifted from the system, to individual schools, for ensuring gender and sexuality education. Notwithstanding, the state government of Victoria decided to take full responsibility for the Safe Schools Coalition program, severing ties with the federal policy stipulation to ensure provision of LGBTQI inclusive education.

Against this policy backdrop, in this paper we are concerned to investigate the networks of power and surveillance that are implicated in how a number of English teachers (of English Literature, English Language and General English) in Western Australia negotiate the teaching of gender and sexual diversity in their classrooms. Conscious of not wanting to present teachers as merely being acted on by policies and legislation in a way that portrays them as ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1995), we are concerned to report on the rich insights yielded through our survey data into teachers’ understandings and navigation of regimes of heteronormativity and cisnormativity, in particular, with respect to curriculum, critical literacy and pedagogical deployment. Drawing on the theoretical work of Bakhtin (1981) and Foucault (1995), we uncover a politics of support and erasure in schools with regards to addressing gender and sexual diversity. Informed by queer and trans informed epistemologies, our analysis is mediated through multiple discourses and networks of power in historical and spatial relations involving class, race, culture, and place (Butler, 1993; Connell & Pearse, 2015; De Palma & Jennett, 2010; Lugg & Murphy, 2014; Sedgwick, 1990).

2. Review of literature

Persistently high degrees of homophobia and transphobia in Australian schools (Hillier et al., 2010; Robinson, Bansel, Denson, Oviden, & Davies, 2014) point to the privileging of a heterosexual and cisgendered world in which individuals are marginalized on the basis of non-normative gender expression, embodiment and sexual identity (Butler, 1993; Leonard, Lyons, & Bariola, 2015; Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2011; Martino & Frank, 2006; Rands,

2009). Colliding with this regime of hetero and cis-normalization is Australian educational policy, notably, the Melbourne Declaration (2008), which espouses excellence, and equity, obliging all government and school sectors to provide students with high quality education that is free from discrimination based on the grounds of gender, sexual orientation, language, culture, pregnancy, ethnicity, relation, health, disability, geographic location or socio-economic background. Linked to a discourse of nationhood, the goals of the Melbourne Declaration resonate with Australia’s signature on numerous international treaties: “Australia values the central role of education in building a democratic, equitable and just society ...” (2008, p.4). However, irony lies in the exemptions for religious schools against anti-discriminatory legislation based on sexual orientation (Sex Discrimination Amendment: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Intersex Status Act, 2013; Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). According to Norden (2016) on grounds of religious freedom, such exemptions allow students and staff to be treated ‘... in a way that could seriously impact on their proper growth and development, their freedom of expression, and their sense of personal values dignity if they are effectively denied the right to express the divergence of sexual identities that exist with any staff group or student community.’ (p. 3).

Aligned with the Melbourne Declaration, The Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2016), advocates for a nation which meets the needs of all young Australians to become actively informed citizens. Explicit is the expectation that personalized curriculum will be achieved through teachers’ guidance of all students towards successful lifelong learning. Under general capabilities, numerous interrelated components appear useful for scaffolding students (and school personnel) to develop an appreciation of diverse genders and sexualities. For example, through collaborative literacy tasks, students can: develop empathy and respect for others; understand the impact their values and behaviours have on others; be open to new ideas and question assumptions and meaning in texts. But absent from the discourse are references to LGBTQI lived and embodied experiences, suggesting a language of silencing, which fails to support the rights of people of diverse genders or sexualities (Ullman & Ferfolja, 2015). When advice is provided regarding student diversity, ACARA’s examples are limited to disability, gifted and talented and English as an Additional Language or Dialect. Furthermore, as per Blackburn and Smith (2010) and Kumashiro (2002), to combat heteronormativity and cis-normativity, educators must go beyond simple inclusion to present LGBTQI identities as intersecting with other factors, such as gender, class, race, etc.

In contrast to ACARA’s limited conception of student diversity, literacy is defined more broadly as students developing ‘knowledge, skills and dispositions to interpret and use language confidently for learning and communicating in and out of school and for participating effectively in society.’ (retrieved 29/11/17 from <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/curriculum/f-10?layout=1#level1>). From this perspective, becoming literate involves interconnected practices such as reading, writing, speaking, listening and viewing, with print and digital texts, and is aligned with sociocultural research, extending literacy beyond classrooms to encompass everyday family, community and institutional apprenticeships (Cumming-Potvin & Sanford, 2015; Luke & Freebody, 1999; The New London Group, 2000). Outlined in the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority’s English curriculum, it is conceivable that student literacy dispositions and behaviours, such as “comparing and evaluating a range of representations of individuals and groups in different historical, social and cultural contexts”, be developed through literature, to facilitate critical discussions about human rights (retrieved 29/11/16 from <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/english/curriculum/f-10?layout=1#level10>). Nonetheless, despite the

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6849791>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6849791>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)