

THE BIG QUESTION...

Unnormalizing Education: How Teacher Education Programs Can Combat Homophobia in K-12 Schools

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Recently, the media again depicted to the nation the epidemic of homophobic bullying within our schools. In the story, another student committed suicide because he was relentlessly bullied because of his perceived sexual orientation. The student's story is the same as other students across the nation. Indeed, homophobia continues to be a tremendous problem in educational settings. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2011), the largest surveyor of school climates in regards to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and question (GLBTQ) students issues, recently reported, "84.9% of students heard 'gay' used in a negative way frequently or often at school, and 91.4% reported that they felt distressed because of this language. 71.3% heard other homophobic remarks frequently or often." An even more disturbing statistic revealed, "56.9% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff." The survey also revealed, "81.9% were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) in the past year because of their sexual orientation. 38.3% were physically harassed

(e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year because of their sexual orientation."

Although these data are alarming, it is beneficial to put a face to the grim statistics using the survival story that emerged from a recent interview with a college student, Madison, a 20 year old rugged young man who attends a state university. From our conversation, I deduced that he is quite bright. He has an incredible command of language and is very laconic. As our conversation developed, he began to discuss his high school years. He grew up in a middle class family, one where he was expected to attend college. His parents both worked outside of the home; his father was a small business owner and his mother a nurse. According to him his high school years were horrible. Although he had not come out in high school, everyone knew he was gay. They constantly harassed him, and he avoided sports because of the harassment and possible locker room assaults. He learned how to skip school without his parents finding out. However, his grades never suffered. He graduated with an incredibly high GPA. To him, high school was not about having fun, but rather it was about survival.

As we talked, he described the countless homophobic slurs that he heard on a daily basis. When asked, he could not remember one teacher or administrator who stopped the harassment. He describes his school as a predominantly white middle class community. The day he began driving his own car to school was one the greatest days of his life because he no longer had to ride the bus, a place where enormous amounts of bullying took place. He could then control when he arrived at and left school. Because of this, he was able to avoid the morning harassments at his locker and in the hallway by taking home his first period books the day before. In doing so, he would not have to stop at his locker, rather, he simply went to class just a few moments before the tardy bell sounded.

His second greatest moment in high school arrived when he was able to join the few students in his school selected for the college joint enrollment program. During his senior year, he took his remaining core courses at the local community college. He was able to gain the necessary credit and avoid the bullies who threatened him on the high school campus (Jones, 2014). For all of the students mentioned in the GLSEN (2011) survey and for Madison, homophobic bullying is a reality in their schooling experiences. Therefore, the question emerges: How can teacher education programs begin addressing the problem of homophobia in schools? In addressing this question, it is necessary to examine the impact of the schooling process on communities, the role of

heteronormativity and the process of unnormalizing education.

The schooling process plays an important role in the philosophical maturation of our society. It is the environment through which all of the socialized normative behaviors students have learned at home begin to be supported or rejected. Social normalization begins at birth and is a cycle of acceptance and exclusion. If we adhere to our community's standards, socialization will confirm us a respected place within our community. If rejected, it will exclude us. Socialization includes every aspect of our lives, even sexuality. In terms of sexuality, society attempts to socialize individuals into accepting and functioning within a normative sexual ideology. In doing so, socialization becomes a catalyst that promotes heteronormativity (Foucault, 1975)

By heteronormativity, I mean a privileging of a heterosexual identity over all other identities by claiming that heterosexuality is normal and other identities are anti-normal. In doing so, heteronormativity creates a binary opposition in which normal sexual identities (heterosexual) are viewed by schools as acceptable and anti-normal (non-heterosexual) are viewed as unacceptable. This binary opposition becomes the framework through which members of society construct their understandings of sexual difference. Further, it is through this binary opposition that normative sexual identities are constructed and deemed as

appropriate by members of the school community (Jones, 2014).

Heteronormativity is a powerful force within educational settings. It influences the treatment of students and school members. It informs curriculum and decision making. In some cases, it influences the hiring of faculty and staff. Therefore, it is imperative that we begin unnormalizing education. By unnormalizing education, I mean a process of breaking free from the defining aspects of socialized normative sexual behavior. In essence, unnormalizing involves a demystifying and deconstructing of the attributes of heteronormativity and how social normative ideologies perpetuate homophobia. Further, unnormalizing education is a process that seeks to dismantle the binary constructions surrounding sexual identity that exists in society and social normalization; thus, destroying the binaries that confine our cognitive understandings concerning sexuality and sexual identity (Jones, 2014).

An important aspect of unnormalizing education involves the recognition and comprehension of the reality of homophobia and how homophobia functions within our society and within individuals. We live in a world that is situated with social norms that are embedded within solidified hegemonic structures. Each of those hegemonic structures exists because of the imbalance of power within our society. Unnormalizing education begins with understanding the

very underpinnings of social normative ideologies and how those ideologies control entire communities and by extension schools.

In order to unnormalize education, specifically within K-12 environments, I postulate teacher education programs must begin examining how we prepare our teacher candidates. We must prepare our future teachers with the necessary tools to combat homophobia and create safe places for GLBTQ students. In unnormalizing education, teacher education programs must recognize the role tolerance should play in our preparation programs. As teacher educators, we must cognitively examine how we prepare future teachers to address issues of difference and otherness within schools.

Tolerance and Multiculturalism

In broad terms and relating to schooling, I define tolerance as a permissive attitude of accepting others views, beliefs, and identities, and in doing so removing the binary structures that exists in the constructions of "otherness." In such a capacity, educational environments should provide tolerant places where students feel validated; so that, they can engage in the learning process. In order to be truly tolerant, educators must recognize and acknowledge the idea that there should be no one dominant culture within school communities. In doing so, educators can create a school that values the concepts of respect for all individuals, acceptance of differences among cultures, and

understanding other cultures, which can be done through multiculturalism.

In order to create tolerant schools, teacher education programs must embrace the notions of multicultural education, with the inclusion of LGBTQ culture within such teacher preparation pedagogy.

Multicultural education is paramount in addressing homophobia in schools.

Multicultural education is important because it requires a level of self-reflection and self-awareness that students may not otherwise experience. It requires individuals to conceptualize their own culture and how their own biases about other cultures and belief systems have been socially constructed. In doing so, multicultural education helps dismantle the binary constructions of the importance of the dominant culture over other cultures; there by, viewing each culture with respect and equality.

Although multiculturalism is important, few teacher preparation programs have a course solely devoted to multicultural education within their undergraduate teacher education program. Rather, undergraduate programs have a brief mention of diversity and tolerance spread throughout their curriculum and coursework. In many programs, this brief mention involves reading one article or having one class discussion revolving around diversity and multiculturalism. Moreover, these brief mentions are not formalized within specific courses; rather they are initiated by specific professors within the department. This is problematic

because the discussion surrounding diversity and tolerance rests solely on the professor teaching the courses and his or her syllabus, which may change drastically as the professor teaching the course changes. In doing so, there is not a formalized set of standards embracing multicultural education. Moreover, this is problematic because a number of undergraduate students will not enter graduate programs, where multiculturalism is more prominently taught in a formalized and structured method.

Hegemonic Masculinity

In addition to multicultural education, unnormalizing education dictates our future teachers must be cognizant of how hegemonic masculinity functions within schools. Hegemonic masculinity plays a tremendous role within the schooling process. In such a capacity, it is important to conceptualize the commencement point of hegemonic masculinity. Specifically, children learn a very young age what it means to be male and female. According to Leitch, Cain, Finke, Johnson, McGowan & Williams (2001), "the little boy learns that his crying is not masculine; he must grow into his masculinity by imitating the behavior designated as "male" to the point that such behavior becomes "second nature." (p. 2486). The same process applies to biologically female children. Each child learns from others of the same gender appropriate gender behaviors and inappropriate gender behaviors. It is through this process, children display their

socially normative and appropriate gender and sexual identity to their communities. All of this happens because of hegemonic practices. Because a patriarchal society values accepted masculine behaviors, hegemonic masculinity controls the normative processes for genders within society, especially biological male genders.

Because of this, hegemonic masculinity proposes males should be able to control others, specifically perceived weaker males. In doing so, hegemonic masculinity rejects any behavior or person who threatens the ideals of what it means to be a masculine male; therefore, it allows homophobia to be premised on an accepted masculinity. I define an accepted masculinity as one where biological males displayed to their communities appropriate masculine attributes (Jones, 2014b). As with other notions of sexuality, these masculine attributes are socialized constructions of what a community defines as normal masculine characteristics. Thus, an appropriate socialized male behavior with masculine attributes guarantees the dominant position of some men in educational settings. To that end, hegemonic masculinity insists that men must reach the ideal level of masculinity to be accepted within the school community, in turn, continuing the patriarchal dominance that exists within society and schools (Jones, 2014a; Jones, 2010).

Because of an accepted masculinity in schools, I postulate that a majority of homophobic acts are directed toward individuals who do not display the

appropriate masculine attributes to their communities. Thus, homophobia is not about an innate sexual identity, but rather homophobia is about a perceived sexuality identity. Homophobia is about a perception of one's sexual identity that is predicated on the individual's level of masculinity. Therefore, a majority of homophobic acts are directed toward effeminate males (Jones, 2010). By effeminate males, I mean biological males who do not conform to socially constructed masculine attributes. I believe this is a tremendous distinction that must be recognized in order to begin truly destroying heteronormativity and homophobia.

Thus, in order to create safe schools for non-heterosexual identities, the process of schooling must dismantle the normalizing process of what it means to be a biological male and biological female within society. In doing so, schools must break free from the binary oppositions that dictate appropriate gender roles for the community, an important aspect of the process of unnormalizing education. Thus, we must begin preparing our future teachers to recognize how hegemonic masculinity functions and how to disrupt it through curriculum choices, language choices, teachable moments, among other instructional strategies.

Contextual Oppositions

Next, teacher education programs must teach future teachers to conceptualize how language and behaviors dictate our understandings and identifications of homophobia and homophobic bullying

(Jones, 2010). Thus, I posit that we must break free from the notions of contextual oppositions. Contextual oppositions involve the process of placing words/actions into binary oppositional relationships through the use of contextual understandings. In order to fully understand how contextual oppositions function within our society, I would like to offer a non-sexuality related example. Several months ago, I was having dinner in Philadelphia with several friends. As we were sitting in the restaurant, an African American male walked over to a nearby table and stated, "What's up N. (He used the racist slur)." From my vantage point, I was able to view everyone involved in the conversation. My friend sitting opposite to me, with her back to the individuals, only heard the statement. She was appalled. She quickly turned around to view the exchange. When she noticed that the conversation was between two African American males, she returned to her previous placement and continued eating. It was evident that her anger had subsided, and I inquired why she was no longer upset. She responded, "it is different in that situation." (Jones, 2012, p.8)

I postulate teacher preparation programs must prepare our future teachers to reconceptualize how they construct meaning concerning language use and behaviors. Specifically, the experience with my friend in Philadelphia revealed how contextual oppositions dictated her understanding, her identifying and her accepting of racist language. For her, it was an appropriate use of racist language; she had contextualized the use of racist language. At first, she was upset about hearing the word because of an assumption

of the context in which it was spoken. After realizing the context, she was willing to accept the use of the word. In that moment for her, the N word was not a racist slur. In doing so, she had contextualized the use of hate language into a structure which I call "contextual oppositions" (Jones, 2012). The traditional meaning of the word did not change, but by contextualizing the word, she ascribed a non-racist definition to the word. I argue that contextual oppositions function in the same manner with teachers' identification and discussion of homophobic language and behaviors, as they relate to the school environment.

Language choices matter. If a student states, "that's so gay" in class, we must prepare our pre-service teachers to address the language appropriately, whether or not they believe the language was used in a derogatory manner. In a recent study I conducted with teachers, the teachers believe that some students may call someone else the F word and not be referring to his or her sexuality, but rather are making a statement similar to "You're an idiot." Because of this, most teachers acknowledged that they did not address students' use of the F word in their schools or their classrooms. As with the F word, most teachers reported that they did not address the use of the word "gay" because of the uncertainty about its meaning and context. A number of the teachers stated that they hear the phrase "that's so gay" quite often in their classrooms and hallways and never reprimand the students. For the teachers in this study, the meanings of

these phrases have evolved into “new” meanings that are antithetical of their traditional meanings (Jones, 2014). However, the language has a traditional meaning ascribed to it. By allowing the language to be used, teachers are allowing the connotations and the hatred to continue. It may not matter to most, but it does matter to a GLBTQ student who is sitting in the same classroom. Language choices matter, and our pre-service teachers must be prepared to address all hate language, regardless of the language’s contextualized understandings.

Implications for Practice

Normative ideologies control the lenses through which a community views sexuality and sexual difference. Schools are reflections of the community in which they are situated, thus, schools become embracing institutions of normative ideologies. In doing so, schools are places where sexuality is examined through a binary framework of “accepted sexuality” and “non-accepted sexuality.” Foucault (1978) postulates schools control the belief systems about sexuality and perpetuate a larger societal belief about sexuality and sexual identity. Therefore, in many ways, schools are catalysts through which heteronormative ideologies are thrust upon students and school personnel (Jones, 2014).

Schools must change. As teacher educators, we must begin to conceptualize the role we play in the socialized normative

processes of K-12 students and by extension communities. As the kindergarten student enters into a classroom, all of the previous years of normalized identity are confirmed and further normalization takes place. The small child learns, through affirmation of his or her teacher and peers, all of the things he or she has been taught are correct. He or she learns the hatred at home toward anyone who is different than he or she is must be true. It is in the first moments of the schooling process, he or she is consumed with the power of hegemony and institutional power regimes.

As the child ages, the normative processes become stronger. The child learns to develop language to describe the concept of otherness and difference. This language development becomes the catalyst for descriptive understandings of the binary oppositions and how he or she fits within those categorized notions of binaries. It becomes the moment when the child learns his or her own categorized identity within those binaries.

Later, the child enters middle school and high school. In those years, the foundation of normalized behavior is solidified. He or she has now formed stable and almost permanent belief systems about otherness. Language becomes a stronger method to express his or her dominance over the other. Homophobic slurs become common language and are thrust upon a less dominant identity within the hierarchy of the binary structure, the same structure that has been utilized and formed throughout the child’s entire schooling

process. After the appropriate number of years, the now adult enters into the “real world,” with the same social belief system as his predecessors, which continues the cyclical nature of prejudice and homophobia.

At the foundation of the process of unnormalizing education lies the reality of the power of schooling. The process of schooling is so vitally important to the continued architecture of social normalization. If schools did not continue the process, the architecture would weaken and the cyclical nature of normalization would dismantle. In doing so, the very ideology of social normative belief systems would weaken.

As teacher educators, we must begin contemplating a schooling process that creates safe and affirming school environments for all students, regardless of the categorized notion of otherness. We must begin examining how our curriculum and pedagogy are catalysts that may be

utilized to address homophobia and hatred within K-12 schools. In doing so, we must prepare undergraduate students to be tolerant of difference, which should be conducted in a formalized multicultural education course and program. We must teach our undergraduate students to recognize how hegemony and hegemonic masculinity functions within schools and prepare them to dismantle such structures through their own pedagogical practices. We must teach our undergraduate students the power of language and how contextual oppositions frame their own definitional parameters surrounding hate language.

Heteronormativity only survives because society allows it to exist. It sustains in society because the schooling process allows the cyclical nature of hatred and marginalization to continue. Teacher education programs must recognize their role in combatting heteronormativity and creating safe places for GLBTQ students to learn and grow.

Author Biography:

Joseph R. Jones, PhD is a former high school English teacher and is known widely for his research addressing homophobia and bullying in educational environments. He has coined two terms in his academic community, contextual oppositions and unnormalizing education. He has been interviewed extensively by media outlets about homophobia and bullying in schools. In November of 2010, his book Making Safe Places Unsafe: A Discussion of Homophobia with Teachers was released. Bullying in Schools: A Professional Development for Educators, was released in the Fall of 2012. His most recent book was released in the 2014, Unnormalizing Education: Addressing Homophobia in Higher Education and K-12 Schools. More recently, he has co-constructed a K-12 anti-bullying program with an academic colleague. In 2014, he was awarded a prestigious national award from Auburn University and the National Anti-Bullying

Summit for his scholarship and service in attempting to create safe schools for all students. He currently teaches at Mercer University.

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