

Homophobia in/as Education

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Relationships of power/knowledge are developed and practised through constructions of identity, working on and through the body, with certain attributes privileged and imbued with power, while others are made 'abnormal.' "Normalization" is a dividing practice which compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, and excludes, not only punishing the "bad," but rewarding the "good"; disciplining, rather than repressing. Through normalization, people are disciplined into "proper" gendered and sexualized subjects, that is a "normal" heterosexuality and a "deviant" homosexuality (Foucault, 1979:180; 184; 1978:94). Heterosexuality is constructed as essential, the basis of intersexual relations, and the basis of reproduction and society, although heterosexuality is an achievement of culture, not its precondition (Prentice, 1994:10; Warner, 1993:xxi).

101

By subordinating the feminine, and by associating homosexuality with effeminacy (Whyte, 1993:29), heterosexual masculinity is normalized as a dominant power. This subordination is deployed through discursive practices which construct 'truths' about sex, gender, and sexuality as '(un)natural,' '(im)moral,' and '(un)healthy,' and are embodied in 'tradition,' 'history,' 'common sense,' and 'facts.' Homophobia encompasses the dividing practices which subordinate bodies based on sexual orientation, (re)producing a "moral panic" about homo/bisexuality which supports the gender-roles privileging heterosexual males (Dollimore, 1986:9) within modern Canadian society.¹ As education is connected to forms of domination and subordination in society (Apple, 1989:1), my analysis examines whether the

educational institution is a site where normative sexuality is both (re)produced and challenged. If there is no homophobia in education, bi/homosexuality will receive an equivalent representation as heterosexuality in educational practices, and all sexualized students will have similar experiences. If homophobia is used in education, then only certain forms of sexuality will be (re)produced as normative. As part of this wide area of research, this work focuses on the experiences of homosexual males in high school.

The high school level was selected for this study because high school students are at the ages of puberty and dating—ages where sex and sexuality dominate their attention—and because the 1992 study by Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny reported that the most frequent attackers in lesbigay-bashing are adolescent males, attributing this violence to a rite of masculinity (Elia, 1993:178). From this it is apparent that for adolescents, homophobia is a component in their understanding of identities.

102 Education in Canada is under provincial jurisdiction, and so my analysis focuses on education in Ontario. Using the Ottawa School Board (OBE) as a sample site, it juxtaposes the discourses of official educational policies and curricula (of the Ontario Ministry of Education—hereafter OME—and the OBE) with the lived experiences of (a purposive sample) of seven homo/bisexual high school students from the Ottawa board. The experiences of these students are not solely based on belonging to one subordinated community, but are based on individuals as composites of several fractured identities connected to several groups. In relation to this study, the respondents are subordinate not only as bi/homosexuals but, among other social constructs, as “youth.”

Adolescence is a cultural construction presented as essential: universal and biological, which negates that it changes, if measurements of puberty are considered, depending on periods of history, geography (both national and urban/rural) and class (based on nutrition and work) (Irvine, 1994:7; Mitterauer, 1992:2-5; 12; 32). As the ideology of this society is white and European, so too is that which is defined as “appropriate” gender behaviour

(Monteiro and Fuqua, 1995:163),² which further complicates what and who is erased or constructed in sexual education. There is little incentive for students of sexually or “racially” subordinated groups to study a curriculum in which they are not included (Sears, 1995:150; Werner, 1995:130; Dei, 1994:291) or in which hierarchies are constructed, in part, through stereotypes about sexuality (Belyea and Dubinsky, 1994:27), and this is compounded by sex, class, and ability (Ward and Taylor, 1994:51), so that sexual education in schools contributes not only to the construction of youths, but to youths’ embodying the values, if not the characteristics, of the dominant group (Irvine, 1994:7)—including adult and “white.”

Some of the work done in the area of homosexuality and education include that of Hetrick and Martin (1987; 1988), Uribe and Harbeck (1992), and Watney (1991) on anti-homophobic education; Telljohann and Pierce (1993) on student experiences with homophobia in education; Sears (1992) on teacher and guidance councillor education on homo/bisexuality; Whatley (1992) on representations of sexuality in sexual education textbooks. In Canada, Adams (1994), Campey et al. (1994), and Lenskji (1994) have examined the history of sexual education in Ontario and at the Toronto Board of Education; and Frank (1994) and Khayatt (1992) have researched the deployment of sexual education through the experiences of students. Despite these few but important articles, there has been a dearth of sociological research in the area of homophobia in education, particularly in Canada, which my work addresses. My research is unique in focusing on both policies and experiences at the secondary school level in Ontario, and in documenting how students actively mediate the structures and curricula of homophobia in education.

There is no accurate rate of homosexuality because there is no exact definition, means of measurement, or means of sample selection, as surveys recording a wide range in the percentage of homosexuals in the same societies have demonstrated (Hamer

and Copeland, 1994:102; 99). Furthermore, as one can "pass" as heterosexual, the closet ensures that all surveys and censuses will be statistically inaccurate.

This project is not concerned with establishing the normalcy of any sexual orientation through the legitimating power of numbers, or of establishing the "fact" of sexualities as essential. This is, partially, due to my interpretation of democracy as "equal rights for all," regardless of percentage in the population, as opposed to the interpretation of democracy as supporting the "rights of the majority." Consequently, a qualitative, rather than quantitative, methodology has been selected to address my concern with how those who are identified as homosexual, regardless of their frequency in the population, perceive and respond to homophobia. I am also aware of my own subjectivity: in what I hear and focus on and what I ignore; in my relations with the respondents as "researcher"; and in my situation vis à vis the topic.

As the policies around sexualities and homophobia are in flux, only the most recent documents on these issues were studied, in order to explore how they are currently presented. Every recent OME guideline that had any information or discussion on sexual orientation or homophobia was examined, and local newspapers were searched for any announcement from the Ministry of Education on the topic. As provincial jurisdictions overlap with, and respond to, federal policies, attention was also paid to the policies and legislations of other provincial departments and to the federal government. All OBE curricula pertaining to health, sexuality, social issues, physical education, and family studies were studied. Reports and policies of the school board that are available to the public were also studied. My research at the board was supplemented by discussions, mostly by telephone, with teachers, committee members, administrators, and trustees of the Ottawa board.

The population of this study was self-selected, and were obtained through several sources. The majority of respondents

were obtained at the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Youth Group of Pink Triangle Services, a community organization for the lesbian community, although the questionnaire was also distributed at the Ottawa-Carleton Youth Services Bureau, and at lesbian groups at Carleton University, the University of Ottawa, and Algonquin College. As well, an announcement about my study was advertised in the *Algo News*, a periodical for the Ottawa-Carleton lesbian community, in the two summer issues of 1995. My study was also posted on the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual, the Youth, and the Feminist newsgroups on the Internet. No limit was set on the number of respondents, as there was a desire to garner the greatest range of experiences, and because there was a desire to avoid selecting an “authentic” or “representative” voice, which would trap the research in essentialism (Martin, 1988:15).

A formal questionnaire was used to ensure that participants could all respond to the same areas of inquiry, although the questions maintained an open-endedness that allowed individuals to focus or expand on areas that had more relevance for them.

Because this project aimed to record the experiences of bi/homosexuals with homophobia, there was a need to contact both those in and out of the closet. It was assumed that those participants who responded via the lesbian youth groups or the community paper would be those who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual—if not, necessarily, at school. To reach those who would not read or appear at a site that would reveal their sexual orientation, the Internet was selected as a research medium.

The results of my present findings are not generalizable. However, if my work corroborates that of other research in this field, it may support arguments for the pervasiveness of homophobia in education, and encourage future study of a more generalizable nature.

Fundamental to this thesis is an understanding of sexuality

and its construction. I have based my understanding on Michel Foucault's works on power/knowledge through anatoma-power and discourse (particularly 1978, 1979, and 1991), and supplemented it in the areas of agency and resistance (Gramsci, 1988; Richer, 1990). Centering on Foucault's concepts of "dividing practices" and "normalization," I have incorporated queer theory into this analysis (Britzman, 1995; Warner, 1993; Sedgwick, 1990). Queer theories not only investigate how "normal" is established, but question the concept of "normalcy." They decentre and resist "the regimes of the normal" so as to expand the parameters of knowledge—to make theory queer—and, subsequently, action. Rather than seeing the effects of normalization as the sites of violence, the process of normalization, in itself, is understood to be a form of violence (Warner, 1993:xxvi). Queer theory is not based on sexual orientation or identity politics, nor does it impose a queer (read: lesbian/gay) space within a heteronormative culture, which could only validate a heterosexual dominance or "normalize" a queerness. Queer theory defines itself against the normal, not the heterosexual (Ibid:xxvi), making a space for all identities within a queer culture, queering identity.

Masculinity allocates social roles and spaces based on sex and reproduction (Whyte, 1993:30), and dominates through institutions which are male-defined and male-dominated (Connell, 1993:602). In the [traditionally] homosocial world of male work and war, homosexuality intersects power and gender through homophobia (Sedgwick, 1990:2-3), but this central position of homophobia does not mean that homosexuals have a central position: the importance of homosexuality is proportionate to its negation and marginality (Dollimore, 1986:5).

In the deployment of a heteronormativity, two overlapping and contradictory strategies of homophobia predominate: with one, homosexuality must be denied, silenced, forgotten in the margins; with the other, homosexuality must be acknowledged, discussed, used to enforce and restate the dominant. In regard to

the first strategy, there is the "closet," which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls "the defining structure of gay oppression in this century" (1990:71). The closet is a place for denying sexuality, for the silencing of identity. The closet is always on the margins. However, the closet also signifies the withholding of information and the power which that entails, for ignorance and silence are as powerful as knowledge (Ibid:4), because ignorance is not oppositional to knowledge, but is an effect of knowledge: its limit (Britzman, 1995:154). In the analysis of homophobia in education, the silences must be deconstructed as well as the discourses: What is silenced? How is silence defined? Who is silenced, and is silence the same for the different groups involved? Is sexuality silenced or ignored?

The second strategy involves discussing the "unmentionable." Educational, medical, psychological, and criminal justice, among other institutions, create discourses about sex, making people more aware of it, and inciting more discussion of it (Foucault, 1978:30-31). Discourses need to be unravelled in order to examine how they support one another, and to locate the social institutions that entitle them.

In regard to the discourses and silences on sexual orientation, four guidelines of the Ontario Ministry of Education are salient.

In *Family Studies: Intermediate and Senior Divisions and OAC*, 1987, "diversity" is mentioned in the "Definition of Family Studies," yet homosexuality is omitted in the examples of diversity, in the units on parenting, and in the units on "Families in Canadian Society" (OME, 1987a:4-5; 62-66; 90-100).

The manual on *Education about AIDS*, 1987, represents homosexuals as closeted, deceitful, isolated, incapable of maintaining relationships, and as a threat to heterosexuals (OME, 1987b:C37; D30).

The *Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation*, 1993, acknowledges that racism is compounded by discriminations

towards gender, disabilities, and sexual orientation, and may be applied both directly and systematically (OME, 1993:5; 42-43). It recognizes that homosexuals may be a target of violence yet, unlike their policies towards race, gender, and disabilities, it does not try to rectify the causes of homophobia.

The recent *Violence-Free Schools Policy*, 1994, comes closest to rectifying the problems of systematic homophobia. In it, the Ministry states that discrimination, including homophobia, is unacceptable, and that school boards must state this in their Code of Behaviour; that the curriculum "must be free of bias and must reflect the diverse groups that compose society" (OME, 1994:18-19). Schools and school boards, according to this document, must report violent or hate-motivated incidents to the police (Ibid:20). This appears as an excellent initial step. However, "must" and "should" are not used interchangeably, and attention should be paid to the selection of these words.

108 Homophobia *is not* to be tolerated, and violent incidents *must* be reported, but school boards *should* address the causes of homophobia, *should* find links within the community, and *should* provide the staff and administration with the knowledge and skills required to identify and eliminate discrimination based on sexual orientation (Ibid:18; 20-22). "Should" does not require school boards that are homophobic to remove the systematic element of their violence, only to respond to direct violence.

These policies and guidelines are mediated by the Ottawa Board of Education in one of their policy manuals, two curricula units, and one report.

In *Towards a Healthy Sexuality, Grade 10: A Sexuality Unit for Grade Ten Students*, 1990, homosexuality and bisexuality are only discussed as "high risk groups" for AIDS (OBE, 1990:36).

In *Health Education Curriculum, Grades 9 and 10*, 1982, homosexuality is only in the unit on "Psychological and Physiological Changes at Puberty," where it is pathologized and seen as a "phase," and a more detailed discussion of homosexuality is omitted because it is not yet completely understood. The guide-

line assumes that they know everything about heterosexuality, that all the students are heterosexuals, and that tolerance, not equality, is required. In the remainder of the curriculum, love and dating are discussed only in reference to heterosexuals (OBE, 1982). Homosexuals have sex; heterosexuals share love.

As with the Ministry guidelines, homosexuality is discussed exclusively in the "Health" and "Family Studies" curricula. By erasure, it is the silenced subject of the other areas of education.

Code 930, the Board's "Anti-Racism and Ethno-Cultural Equity Policy," is based on the Ministry guideline. In it, they replace the Ministry's term "sexual orientation" with "lifestyle" (OBE, 1993:2).

Finally, *The Report No. 94-110 from the Administration to the Ottawa Board of Education, Re: Programs, Policies, and Curriculum that Address Issues of Homophobia and Sexual Orientation* was written in 1994 as a response to reports and inquiries by several groups about homophobia in the schools and the high risk of suicide among homosexual teenagers (OBE, 1994:1-2). After studying the issues, it recommended that the curricula does not need to be changed, and that only staff development programs dealing with sexuality should be initiated (Ibid:2-5).

Notwithstanding official policies against homophobia, all the respondents in my study perceived their high schools as homophobic. Two respondents came "out" only after graduating; one respondent changed schools frequently, in order to prevent his sexuality from becoming known; another dropped out of school because of the "constant stress" caused by homophobic students.

Homophobia was experienced verbally, through comments by students and, occasionally, by teachers, and through the silences by teachers and administrators regarding reports of homophobia. It was experienced physically, in attacks—or in witnessing other students attacked, which reinforced their fears of coming out; and through graffiti and vandalism. It was also

experienced through the internalization of stereotypes about deviants; through the fear that coming out would result in violence and ostracism; and through the belief that they were "the only one" in their school. All seven respondents admitted that, at some point in their high school life, they acted homophobic as a way to appear heterosexual.

Although homophobic attacks must be reported to the police, the Ottawa police have received only one report of homophobia from the region's high schools (Ottawa Bias Crimes Unit; 1995). The discrepancy between the examples of homophobia reported by the respondents and the dearth of incidents reported to the police may have to do with who creates the discourse and defines an action as homophobic. One of the respondents reported that homophobic incidents in his school are "swept under the rug," while another reported that homophobic violence would be considered as "just a violence problem, not connected to anything."

110 None of the respondents were aware of the Ministry policy. The fact that these students are unaware that they are protected exemplifies how official discourses can be silenced for the benefit of the dominant.

Sexuality is officially included in only two subjects of the high school curricula, it was not always discussed in those classes whereas it appeared in other areas of education. Four of the respondents claimed that homosexuality was included in the Health component of their Physical Education classes, but all claimed that it was quickly dismissed or joked about by the teachers. In "Family Studies," homosexuality was discussed, not because it was in the curriculum, but because of the recent media attention on same-sex legislation, or because lesbian/gay students in the classes instigated discussions or requested information on the topic. Four respondents mentioned homosexuality being discussed in English classes. This may reflect the attitudes of the individual teachers, as homosexuality is not a required element of any English curriculum. Other subjects where respondents claimed

homosexuality was mentioned were: drama, geography, and science, and law. The inclusion of homosexuality, for the majority of these students, was by their own initiative, through using the flexibility of "independent study" projects to introduce lesbian and gay topics and issues into the curricula.

Sexuality is also taught, unofficially, through the assumption that the teachers are role-models. Teachers announce and promote their heteronormativity through wedding rings and asides about their personal lives. Respondents were asked if they knew any teacher(s) at their school who were out. Only two respondents knew teachers who were open about their homosexuality. However, four respondents claimed they discovered teachers in bars or at lesbian and gay events, or found out about teachers after they graduated. The students felt this reinforced homophobia: that closeted teachers promoted a shameful identity.³

Many of the respondents found strategies to resist homophobia. There was active resistance, such as reporting homophobia to the administration and to the local media, introducing lesbian and gay content into their work, attending school dances in same-sex couples, wearing "gay pride" clothing and insignias; and there was passive resistance, such as not declaring one's sexuality, or changing schools. Resistance was both individual, such as those who, as the only person out in their school, hoped to be role-models for other students; and collective, such as attempting to form lesbian and gay groups within the schools. Resistance often took several forms simultaneously, even when contradictory.

To conclude, homophobia is deployed through the erasure of homosexuality from the bulk of the curricula; from the assumption that teachers and students are heterosexual; through the discourses of the abnormal and the pathological; in the structures of an institution that do not provide job protection or spousal benefits for homosexual teachers. Homophobia is in policies that allow a lack of resources and expertise to justify inaction; that prohibit homophobic violence with "musts," but tolerate it with

“shoulds.” It is counted in the police reports on homophobia in the high schools (one), and these pages of daily encounters. It is heard in the differences between the official pronouncements of “tolerance,” “diversity,” and “violence-free schools,” and the lived experiences of homosexual students who are peripheralized, disciplined, erased, and taught to stay, silenced, within the closets.

Homophobia is resisted by those students who refuse the closets and their silencing. Each of the seven students interviewed had created a space of resistance, figuratively and literally. Resistance also comes from teachers who come out to their students, and in teachers and administrators, both lesbian and straight, who create spaces for lesbian-positive components in their curricula, and who challenge homophobia.

While official policies may claim to promote the diversity of students and to combat homophobia, they continue to represent homosexuals as the problem which is solved, not through diversity, but through normalization, or erasure.

NOTES

1. The term “homosexual” is the prevalent term used in this study as it is the most frequent term used in the “official” discourses. Its use draws attention to the scientific typologies which instill “truth” into bodies. “Lesbian”, “gay”, and “bisexual” (and their collective abbreviation as “lesbigay”) will refer to homosexuals and bisexuals who identify themselves as “out” and as part of homo/bisexual communities.
2. This compounds “race” with sex, as Western culture’s mind/body dualism attributes mind, reason, and civilization with men; and body, emotion, and nature with women (Prentice, 1994:5).
3. Teachers at the OBE are not protected against discrimination based on “sexual orientation” in their policy manual (OBE, 1985:1)), nor are they protected by their union (telephone interview, union representative, Ontario Secondary School Teachers’ Federation, November, 1994).

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