

AEG5108 Social Context of Teaching and Learning Assessment 1 - Research Essay

It is now widely recognised that in order to provide a fair and equitable education system the concept of social inclusion must be addressed, and even prioritised. It is not unusual to see articles in the public media addressing the disparity in resourcing and achievements between schools in areas of low and high socioeconomic status. Government education departments are actively attempting to implement policies and programs to better the education outcomes of disadvantaged students. Indeed, one of the corporate priorities of the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development is to “improve outcomes for disadvantaged young Victorians” (DEECD Corporate Plan 2011, p.15). However there is one group of disadvantaged students who routinely, even deliberately, get overlooked. Students, and teachers, who identify as queer or same-sex attracted continue to be discriminated against and unsupported both covertly and overtly. This is an injustice that must be redressed; it is critical that a transparent dialogue is initiated in schools and in wider society to raise awareness of and stem the damage that is being caused by the hidden heterosexist curriculum.

There are four main issues that can be readily identified as factors that contribute to disadvantage for queer and same-sex attracted individuals in the education system. These can apply to all stakeholders in a school community but frequently have the most deleterious impact on students. The first, and most obvious, is homophobia. This may be generalised, non-specific homophobia (such as pejorative language used in the classroom or school yard) through to targeted homophobic bullying, either verbal or physical. A great deal of non-specific homophobia has been observed in schools in the western suburbs of Melbourne, predominantly unchecked by teachers. Students frequently use the phrase “That’s so gay” to imply something is stupid or bad in some way, and also routinely use the word “faggot” to denigrate male students who are generally not present. When questioned about this use of language students will often claim ignorance; that they don’t know what homophobia is or realise that they were being offensive.

The other three issues may be less visible, but are no less damaging. Firstly, heteronormativity is overwhelmingly prevalent in school curriculums, sometimes verging into outright heterosexism. This factors into the second concern, a lack of representation of queer and same-sex attracted people and their lives, often accompanied by an unwillingness to enter into a dialogue about sexual diversity. There are schools in the western suburbs of Melbourne that have several queer staff members, but they are not out to the students in any way. Where other teachers are free to talk about husbands or girlfriends, the queer teachers deflect these kinds of questions. Any queer or same-sex attracted students are being deprived of the same kinds of role models and positive reinforcement that the other students routinely get. The third and final problem is a general lack of understanding in teaching staff and in the wider field of education of the queer context and the impact this casual, tacit marginalisation has on students at such a fragile time in their development. All of these issues can be mitigated to a large degree by the recognition of queer and same-sex attracted students as a disadvantaged group, and a focus on inclusion and equity.

For some time the concepts of equality and equity in education were used somewhat interchangeably, but dialogue now tends to focus more readily on issues of equity. Sturman (1997) posits equity as "stronger" than equality in this context, and that equity encompasses "the recognition that group inequalities may be unjust". Pullin (2011) states that "educators and policy makers seeking to facilitate learning must take into account that learning only occurs for those who are able to take advantage of learning opportunities", and notes that educational practices such as certain assessment techniques may actually be playing a part in entrenching social inequality within disadvantaged groups. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD Corporate Plan 2011, p.15) acknowledges that inclusion of disadvantaged groups is a way to potentially end the cycle of disadvantage within schools and the community.

Kenway (1996, p. i) states unequivocally that "sexuality is an important educational and equity issue", and yet time and time again sexuality or sexual orientation is overlooked as a measure of disadvantage. Pullin (2008, p. 337) discusses how opportunities to learn are not equally spread across different groups of students, but excludes sexuality as a measure of difference. Similarly, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Corporate Plan (2011, p. 15) concedes that certain groups of students are not performing as well at school as they could be due to disadvantage, but again does not include sexual diversity as one of the indicators. Zajda (2011) explicitly and comprehensively defines seven dimensions that can explain inequality in education but fails to give so much as a passing reference to queer and same-sex attracted students. This lack of recognition is insidious, and is a huge contributor to the issues being faced by these students in schools. If there is no formal recognition of sexual diversity as an indicator of disadvantage then there is no professional development available to assist staff in understanding the problems faced by queer and same-sex attracted students, and no support structure in place to provide guidance for students or teachers.

Conservatives have asserted repeatedly that teachers and schools should not be obliged to provide even so much as visibility of queer and same-sex attracted individuals and culture, let alone education about it. One of the arguments put forward for this stance is that education should be limited to the various disciplines covered on the curriculum. This narrow view neglects to consider the wider role that the school environment does have in students social and emotional development, as well as their academic progress. Pearson et al. (2007) noted that schools are the place where much of an adolescent's development takes place, including dealing with their emerging sexuality whether heterosexual, same-sex attracted or otherwise. Adolescents also learn critical skills to prepare them for the transition to adult roles once they leave school. Kumashiro (cited in Ferfolja 2007, p. 149) posits a dual role for schools - they serve to privilege and marginalise certain groups respectively, as well as providing legitimacy to this creation of social order. In effect this means that disappearing queer and same-sex attracted issues from the curriculum reinforces their marginalisation in the wider community.

Pallotta-Chiarolli (1996, p. 55) believes that schools can be instead a place of change, that this social order can be deconstructed. Recognition of queer and same-sex attracted students and the specific issues they face, and putting into place measures to address the inequity these issues create is an important starting point, and will hopefully have a flow on effect into the rest of society as Pallotta-Chiarolli hopes.

“The perennial disenfranchisement of sexual minority students and teachers in school settings replicates the historical sociocultural positioning of these individuals as sex, sexual, and gender deviants.” Grace and Wells (2006, p.52) found this to be true in the Canadian education system, but it is equally applicable in the Australian setting. Ferfolja (2007) observes that heteronormative and heterosexist discourses in schools serve to normalise heterosexuality and legitimise it as the only valid sexuality, and imply that any other form of sexuality is shameful. It has been observed that some external providers of sex education in Melbourne have a policy of directing questions about same-sex attraction back to the parents. The implicit message is that this is not something to be talked about at school, whereas students are free to ask questions about opposite-sex attraction. Same-sex attracted adolescents are at their most vulnerable state of development in schools, and are being confronted with these contexts as the dominant social order. It is not difficult to imagine the feelings of isolation and marginalisation this would invoke, the sense that these students are outside the social norm. Pearson et al. (2007) state that students who feel alienated by their school may have difficulty trusting and therefore negotiating with staff about academic progress and the requirements for postsecondary education, and this may compromise their long term chances for success. Pearson et al. (2007) also found that queer and same-sex attracted students may not be performing as well academically due to their disengagement from school. Additionally, there is some evidence that same-sex attracted boys in particular may be avoiding what are perceived to be more hostile, competitive subjects such as maths and science, thereby lessening their opportunities for higher education and decreasing their possible career choices into adulthood. These are similar findings to students from other marginalised and

disadvantaged groups.

The bulk of the discussion above has centred on the impact on queer and same-sex attracted students and teachers, but these issues also have an effect on other members of the school community. Heterosexual students are not given the benefit of exposure to sexual diversity and therefore have less chance to develop understanding and empathy for difference. Similarly, heterosexual teachers may not have personal experience they can draw from if a queer or same-sex attracted student comes to them for help, and are generally not given adequate professional development to support themselves or the students. Outside of the school environment there are other stakeholders who can be impacted in various ways. Same-sex parents whose children attend the school may feel marginalised by heteronormative bureaucratic forms and processes, or be concerned for their children's welfare if there is the likelihood of homophobic bullying at school. Same-sex parents experience situations where they have filled in forms to reflect their own family structures and had the administrative staff at the school alter the student's record to reflect heteronormative structures. This might not necessarily have been done with homophobic intent, but reflects the lack of understanding in the school community regarding family and sexual diversity. Queer and same-sex attracted individuals in the wider community may also have cause for concern; a school that either covertly or overtly follows a heterosexist curriculum may inspire a greater number of incidents involving homophobic assault that could spill over into the community.

It is imperative that queer and same-sex attracted students are recognised as a group that experiences inequity in their education. The government and schools already have an awareness of the needs of other disadvantaged groups, it is long past time to include sexual diversity. Naturally this will not be an easy process. Long standing prejudice and bigotry among certain groups in the community will undoubtedly cause obstacles. As Moshman (2002) notes, beginning to address issues of heterosexism and homophobia impacts on intellectual freedom. If the long term detrimental effects on queer and same-sex attracted students are to be

averted, however, this is a discomfort which must be endured for the benefit not only of the students but of society as a whole.

References

- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development 2011, *Department of Education and Early Childhood Development Corporate Plan 2009 - 2011*, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Melbourne, viewed 17 May 2012, <<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/stratman/planning/corpplan/deecdcorporateplan.pdf>>
- Ferfolja, T 2007, 'Schooling cultures: institutionalizing heteronormativity and heterosexism', *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, vol. 11, no.2, pp. 147-162, viewed 16 May 2012, retrieved from VU Library database.
- Grace, AP & Wells, K 2006, 'The Quest for a Queer Inclusive Cultural Ethics: Setting Directions for Teachers' Preservice and Continuing Professional Development', in Hill, RJ (Ed.), *Challenging homophobia and heterosexism : lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues in organizational settings*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, pp. 51-61.
- Kenway, J 1996, 'Foreward', in Laskey, L & Beavis, C (eds.), *Schooling & sexualities: teaching for a positive sexuality*, Deakin Centre for Education and Change, Geelong, pp. i-ii.
- Moshman, D 2002, 'Homophobia and Academic Freedom', *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3-4, pp. 147-161, viewed 16 May 2012, retrieved from VU Library database.
- Pallotta-Chiarolli, M 1996, 'A rainbow in my heart': interweaving ethnicity and sexuality studies', in Laskey, L & Beavis, C (eds.), *Schooling & sexualities : teaching for a positive sexuality*, Deakin Centre for Education and Change, Geelong, pp. 53-67.
- Pearson, J, Muller, C & Wilkinson, L 2007, 'Adolescent Same-Sex Attraction and Academic Outcomes: The Role of School Attachment and Engagement', *Social Problems*, vol. 54, no. 4, pp. 523-542, viewed 16 May 2012, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/sp.2007.54.4.523>>.
- Pullin, DC 2008, 'Assessment, Equity, and Opportunity to Learn', in Moss, PA, Pullin, DC, Gee, JP, Haertel, EH & Jones Young, L, *Assessment, equity, and opportunity to learn*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Sturman, A 1997, *Social justice in education*, Australian Council for Educational Research, Melbourne.
- Zajda, J 2011, 'Globalisation and schooling: equity and access issues', *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, vol. 6, no. 1, pp. 143-152, viewed 16 May 2012, retrieved from VU Library database.