LGBTQ Teacher's Identities Within Heteronormative School Environments

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Abstract

LGBTQ teachers face multiple challenges throughout their professional life as a result of pervasive heteronormative school environments or heteronormativity in general. Nevertheless, LGBTQ teachers' realities remain somewhat undiscussed and underexplored, especially in Colombia. This article reflects upon the way LGBTQ educators' identities are hindered by heteronormative workplace climates and addresses actions that might lead to the (re)construction of more supportive school environments in Colombia.

Key words: heteronormativity, identity, LGBTQ teachers, school environment, workplace climate

Resumen

Los docentes LGBTQ enfrentan múltiples desafíos a lo largo de su vida profesional como resultado de los dominantes entornos escolares heteronormativos o la heteronormatividad en general. Sin embargo, las realidades de los docentes LGBTQ permanecen indiscutidas y poco exploradas, especialmente en Colombia. Este artículo reflexiona sobre la forma en que las identidades de los educadores LGBTQ se ven obstaculizadas por climas laborales heteronormativos y aborda acciones que podrían conducir a la (re)construcción de entornos escolares más propicios en Colombia.

Palabras clave: clima laboral, docentes LGBTQ, entorno escolar, heteronormatividad, identidad

Introduction

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community in the teaching field is a group that has been overlooked and marginalized over the years in numerous countries. In the last decade, more research has been conducted on this aspect, raising more awareness of the need and importance of including this group's voices (Gray, Harris, & Jones, 2016; Pearce & Cumming- Potvin, 2017**;** Wright & Smith, 2015). However, most of the research has focused on the students' side, ignoring the educators' perspectives. Considering that the notion of social justice has become pertinent issue, it is fundamental to delve deeper into the perspectives of LGBTQ teachers; a group that has been historically oppressed. The aforementioned will allow an understanding in which heteronormative discourses are not the core, leading to a more positive school climate not only for LGBTQ individuals but for the rest of the community too.

In spite of the recent and extensive socio-political change in the lives of LGBTQ people in multiple countries around the world (Langlois, 2018), including Colombia, heteronormativity continues to be dominant, disregarding the perspectives of the members of the LGBTQ community. Heteronormativity can be understood as "the structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent – that is, organized as a sexuality – but also privileged" (Berlant & Warner, as cited in Smith, Wright, Reilly, & Esposito, 2008, p. 5). This heteronormative perspective assumes heterosexuality as the norm and leads to the discrimination and marginalization of minorities.

Social justice in education implies seeing individuals for who they are and where they come from, that is, recognizing them as valuable contributors to the classroom space, as opposed to social, cultural, and academic burdens. Despite the fact that LGBTQ issues have been included within multicultural education (Rottmann, 2006), studies on LGBTQ teachers, counselors, and specialists' perspectives are scarce. The little research that has been reported in regard to this community shows that they still perceive their workplace climate as troubling, unsafe, and unsupportive (Becker, 2014; Gray, Harris, & Jones, 2016; Wright & Smith, 2015).

In Colombia, LGBTQ issues have not been explored considerably. Some researchers have inquired about LGBTQ diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Choi et al. 2020; Cárdenas, Ramos, & Olaya, 2017; Jiménez, Cardona, & Sánchez, 2017), concluding that this issue is rather complex since it is context dependent and varies among its participants.

Unfortunately, in the educational field, little is known regarding this aspect.

This article seeks to unveil how LGBTQ educators' identities are hindered by heteronormative workplace climates and the actions that can be taken in multiple settings to guarantee environments that support these teachers. Assessing these experiences enables us to draw comparisons that can lead to reflection upon the reality of our own contexts.

In this article, I will start by presenting the concept of identity focusing on the development of LGBTQ teachers' identity, followed by the construct of heteronormativity and how it hinders identity development and education. Subsequently, I will discuss how heteronormative perspectives and discourses can be challenged by addressing LGBTQ identities through Queer theory. Finally, I will add to the discussion on the role of LGBTQ educators within heteronormative school environments and provide some conclusions linking them to the Colombian context.

LGBTQ Teachers' Identity

The construct of identity has been explored in multiple fields, yet a consensus on a comprehensive and conclusive definition has not been reached. In the book *Teaching Selves: Identity, Pedagogy, and Teacher Education*,

Danielewicz (2001) defined identity as "our understanding of who we are and of who we think other people are. Reciprocally, it also encompasses other people's understanding of themselves and others (which includes us)" (p. 10). Additionally, the author asserts that identity involves the notions of similarities and differences. Thus, this definition suggests that we can comprehend ourselves better by understanding others and vice versa considering our commonalities and divergences, that is, the aspects we share such as race, religion, nationality, etc., and the ones that distinguish us from each other, such as our worldviews and personality.

From birth, we are intrinsically ascribed to groups or communities, in which we play different roles. As a result, our identities cannot be considered innate or genetically determined; instead, they are socially produced (Weedon, 1997). For instance, one can be a father, a husband, a friend, and an employee at the same time. All are examples of roles that entail different functions and ways of being that not only influence one's behavior but also shape one's definition of self. Taking into account the prior mentioned, identifying oneself as a teacher implies more than assuming that role and filling a vacancy at a school district. Being an educator entails the interplay of multiple conflicting

identities that exist inside individuals and that are constantly changing (Danielewicz, 2001), and for the LGBTQ educators, this process can be considered even more complicated.

Barkhuizen's (2017) definition of teacher identity coincides with some of the aspects mentioned by Danielewicz (2001). Barkhuizen sees teacher identity as "core and peripheral, personal and professional, dynamic, multiple, and hybrid" (p. 4), reinforcing the idea that identities are not unified and fixed; on the contrary, they are continuously being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Although one can identify oneself as a member of the LGBTQ community, it does not mean this is a static identity construction process since the journey of accepting one's sexuality or gender identity and coming to terms with it varies from individual to individual. Furthermore, this self-definition is affected by diverse variables such as ethnicity, religious affiliation, and contextual factors, especially within school communities where teachers have to decide on what aspects of their LGBTQ identity can be shared depending on the setting, person, and purpose. As a result, aspects of self might be erased for the adoption of normative behaviors or ways of being.

The integration of personal and professional aspects, as stated by Barkhuizen (2017), is also part of one's identity; nonetheless, for members of the LGBTQ community, this might not be as simple since sharing aspects of their gender identity and/or sexuality in the workplace involves a constant assessment of the situations so as to establish threatening or non-threatening conditions. Palkki's research (2015) showed that a significant part of LGBTQ identity negotiation involves decisions regarding whether to speak openly about one's non-normative orientation in the workplace, that is, deciding upon how, when, why, and with whom to share LGBTQ status. Unfortunately, heterosexual people do not have to deal with this kind of situation; therefore, they can easily dovetail their personal and professional lives without fear of offending others (Ward & Winstanley, 2005), yet members of the LGBTQ community are often prevented from doing it to avoid adverse reactions from the rest of the school community.

Regardless of the discomfort that unveiling one's sexuality can cause, LGBTQ teachers must address this aspect of their identity since avoiding these discussions invites students to ascribe normative, heterosexual, and cisgender status to teachers (McWilliams & Penuel, 2016), hindering the teaching and learning process as mentioned above. According to Nelson (1999), sexuality can be tackled and explored at school through Queer theory, which problematizes all sexual identities, not just that of sexual

minorities. Moreover, it allows the analysis of how discursive and cultural practices and acts in our day-to-day interaction construct, such as what is perceived as normal and natural, that is, heteronormative perspectives.

Heteronormativity

Living in a heteronormative society, where heterosexuality is the assumed sexuality by default, might seem insignificant for some, yet for the people who do not identify as such, it is a complex issue. Heteronormative environments foster heteronormativity that can be understood as a system in which heterosexuality is emphasized as the natural and prescriptive sexual orientation, disregarding all other expressions of sexuality. According to Evripidou (2018), heteronormativity refers to "a system whose structures, institutions, relations, and actions promote and produce only heterosexuality as self-evident, desirable, privileged, and necessary, while all other sexualities are contested and marginalised" (p. 2). This definition indicates that heteronormativity can shape the way people conceive sexuality since it permeates to the core of community behaviors, relationships, and standpoints; hence, it promotes stigmatization of people who do not self-identify with this prescriptive sexuality.

Furthermore, the heteronormative perspective leads to a binary conception of realities that dismisses the rest of the members of the community. This hetero/homo outlook fails to acknowledge the different identities that are part of the community. In other words, this minoritizing view does not recognize bisexual, transgender, queer and all the people across the spectrum of sexuality (Sedgwick, as cited in Evripidou, 2018). Therefore, a universal view must be endorsed, so as to embrace and recognize all the members of the community, which can be achieved through Queer theory.

In the field of education, both in developed and developing countries, the heteronormative scheme is accentuated, resulting in an unsafe and unpleasant workplace climate for LGBTQ educators. Research has shown that LGBTQ teachers who feel accepted have a higher level of professional efficacy, which contributes to increasing students' achievement (Gray, Harris, & Jones, 2016; Leithwood & McAdie, 2007). Thus, it is crucial that teachers are granted safe workplaces where identity development is encouraged, so they do not have to deny or hide part of who they are.

Heteronormativity in the workplace hinders educators' engagement towards their teaching practices since this disconnection between the school atmosphere and their

identities inhibits them from establishing real connections with their colleagues and their students given that they are forced to hide part of their individuality. The research conducted by Wright and Smith (2015) showed that LGBTQ educators regularly experience negative consequences when they are sincere about their sexuality, such as threats of job loss, pay discrimination, and reassignment by administrators. The aforementioned prevents teachers from unveiling their sexuality since there are not enough guarantees that can protect them from this infringement. Thereupon, the integration of Queer theory to educational policies is fundamental, so LGBTQ teachers' identities are respected and accepted by their peers and students in order to guarantee a healthier school environment where educators do not feel at risk.

Queer Theory

The emergence of Queer theory during the early 1990s offered scholars the opportunity to interrogate normativity and to explore the existent power imbalance within organizational systems. Spargo (1999) claimed that Queer theory could not be understood merely as a singular or systematic conceptual or methodological framework, since it offers a collection of intellectual engagements with the relations between sex, gender, and sexual desire. Therefore, defining Queer theory is rather a complex and limiting issue, an idea that coincides with Dilley (1999) who argues that Queer theory is still an elusive subject that cannot be bound since its essence is questioning boundaries. However, it is through the lens of Queer theory that we can challenge and interrupt the silent assumptions that accompany heterosexuality as the norm and can disrupt normalizing discourses that have traditionally been used to control people at all levels of education (Dykes & Delport, 2018).

Queer theory cannot be interpreted as a synonym of gay and lesbian studies because it is much broader and encompasses more than merely exploring gay and lesbian identity and experience. Meyer (2007) states that Queer theory "questions taken-for-granted assumptions about relationships, identity, gender, and sexual orientation. It seeks to explore rigid normalizing categories into possibilities that exist beyond binaries" (p. 15). As it can be evidenced, Queer theory is a contestation to heteronormativity that tends to limit realities by interpreting them based on arbitrary binary distinctions. Besides providing people with the necessary analytical tools to deconstruct issues of sexuality in society by giving voice to the insider (Dilley, 1999),

Queer theory challenges the basic tropes that are used to organize society.

In the educational arena, Queer theory offers teachers the opportunity to transform the school reality by raising awareness on the importance of addressing and recognizing other identities, and by challenging heteronormative discourses that can be intentionally or inadvertently offensive and oppressive. Meyer (2007) argues that Queer theory enables teachers to "reduce and eventually remove all forms of gendered harassment and other forms of related discrimination from schools and, consequently, from most realms of society" (p. 28). Therefore, the inclusion of Queer theory in education offers LGBTQ teachers the opportunity to transform their experiences into productive and valuable resources and assets for classroom discussion examining how heteronormativity at school and in society marginalizes and stigmatizes sexual minorities systematically.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although society has developed and become more accepting of sexual differences, LGBTQ educators still have to deal with adverse workplace environments. Research has shown that LGBTQ educators still perceive their workplace climate as troubling, unsafe, and unsupportive (Gray, Harris, & Jones, 2016;

Smith, Wright, Reilly, & Esposito, 2008; Wright & Smith, 2015). Even some of the participants of these research studies claimed that they had been harassed, had rumors spread about them, worked with no civil protections, and rarely received benefits equal to their heterosexual colleagues. All of these issues force educators, who identify as members of the LGBTQ community, not only to separate their sexuality from their professional life but to pretend and act based on heteronormative norms, so as to pass as a straight person.

Unfortunately, heteronormative environments are pervasive within school settings due to the internalization of societal discourses in which the LGBTQ identity is either disregarded or pointed out as abnormal. Some developed and developing countries still display a hostile atmosphere towards LGBTQ educators despite the passage of time. Nonetheless, it is crucial that teachers who do not identify as heterosexual can disclose their sexuality and feel comfortable doing it in order to start normalizing LGBTQ identities and challenging stereotypes.

The study conducted by Jackson (2007) demonstrated that it is not the fact of identifying as a member of the LGBTQ community that made being an educator difficult at times; rather, challenges emerged from the context of a heteronormative society, where they are not

protected from discrimination. Heteronormative settings contribute to a complex climate for LGBTQ educators experiencing dissonance because they want to protect and be role models for LGBTQ youth without risking their employment status. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt Queer theory to challenge heteronormative perspectives and suppress marginalizing discourses that are rather predominant in multiple schools.

Queer theory plays an essential role in the recognition and acceptance of LGBTQ identities within the educational field and society in general. In Colombia, it is necessary to raise more awareness and increase the visibility of this historically oppressed community since this might lead to the reconstruction of societal norms. By questioning the binary understanding and organization of society, realities will start being reconsidered and reshaped based on the acceptance of multiple identities that nowadays are overlooked. Additionally, with the integration of Queer theory, educational institutions can be reoriented to better serve LGBTQ youth and create a safer school environment for the community.

Nowadays, school policymakers should strive to include policies that guarantee safe spaces for LGBTQ educators, where they are not judged based on their sexual orientation, either by students, parents, or colleagues. It is fundamental that school leaders get involved in the restructuration of policies since they directly or indirectly have an essential impact on the workplace climate for LGBTQ educators. School administrators have the power to influence and enforce policy at their own schools, as well as create professional development opportunities that include training on diversity issues relating to LGBTQ individuals in the school setting and on the unique challenges these individuals face. Additionally, school administrators in our country are required to shift their perspectives in order to include LGBTQ content in their curricula, considering that representation is vital since it allows students and the rest of the school community to value and respect differences.

Colombia is a country where homophobic and chauvinistic thoughts and behaviors are part of our everyday life. Nevertheless, it does not mean that some policies have been ruled to guarantee safer spaces and more equality for the members of the LGBTQ community. In the field of education, there is an immediate need for the restructuration of school policies. LGBTQ educators and all the members of the school community who do not identify with heterosexuality need to enjoy secure environments where they can express themselves and live their life freely without worrying that

their rights are going to be violated. The importance of safe school climates relies on the fact that these allow educators to interact in a positive, non-threatening manner while fostering positive relationships and personal growth (Bucher & Manning, 2005).

Although the research related to LGBTQ individuals in the teaching field is still scarce, exploring LGBTQ realities in the teaching and learning field in our country is paramount (Castañeda-Peña, 2019). Therefore, it is fundamental to conduct research on this aspect since it will contribute to establishing the situation for LGBTQ educators in Colombia and will enable the development of discussion spaces and policies, which might lead to the development of positive workplaces. Thus, better educators' performance and efficacy, as well as higher students' level of attainment, will be reached.

About the Author

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