

The Teaching of Sexual and Gender Diversity Issues to Pre-service Teachers at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: Lessons from Student Exam Responses

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Abstract

This paper uses Kumashiro's (2002) anti-oppressive education theory to explore the type of education offered in a module on sexual and gender diversity at a South African School of Education. This is done through analysing the responses of students in one exam question, focussed on sexual diversity, in a compulsory final year module offered to 661 pre-service teachers at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Focussed on human rights education, ethics and teacher professionalism, the module is designed to assist pre-service teachers in the promotion of social justice in the classroom. The analysis not only shows a heightened awareness of same-sex terminology and issues among students, it also highlights the possibilities that anti-oppressive pedagogy offers to teacher educators in teaching for diversity and social change. Further, the analysis also demonstrates that while useful in heightening awareness among students and enabling change, anti-oppressive pedagogies should pay more attention to the interrogation of students' own sexualities in order to trouble the 'asexual teacher discourse'. Such teaching would require the creation of safe environments for students through the creation of smaller classes as well as offering more time on teaching related material. The paper offers possible implications for further work in this area.

Keywords: homophobia, heterosexism, anti-oppressive pedagogy, LGBTI, higher education; teaching

... hope u watching SABC 2 ... just the topic u brought in Ed 420. Wow since then I became a critical thinker and started to accept people as they are. Tune in into sabc 2 #so much hatred from these people my word ... am very open-minded now...meant what I wrote in my exam (STUDENT 1)

... I'm so glad we did sexual orientation in Ed 420. I'm so grateful to you...I meant what I said about [the] workshops [for] 'We all count'. It was not only for marks Doc believe me! (STUDENT 2)

I begin this paper rather unconventionally by presenting extracts from a conversation I had with two students on Facebook, concerning a documentary on same-sex issues that was presented on SABC 2 in 2012. Mainly, the students were making links between what they were observing on television and what they had learnt in Education Studies 420, a final-year compulsory module offered to Bachelor of Education students with a focus on human rights, ethics and teacher professionalism. The students' comments surprised me as, very often, as teacher-educators committed to social justice, we are unaware of the impact that our work has in transforming the lives of our students. This is more so when one has had very limited time with the students and, as Malley, Hoty and Slattery (2009) observe, we often 'have little, if any, influence over [our students'] schools or school districts' (p. 96) or even their personal attitudes after they have finished studying our modules. I was additionally intrigued that the students noted the impact of the module and both made reference to reflecting this in their exam responses. This triggered an interest into exploring the type of anti-oppressive education we offered in the module, using student exam responses to the question on sexual diversity. In this paper, I seek to present findings of my analysis of the student exam papers.

Internationally, there is increased focus on the teaching of sexual diversity issues to pre-service and in-service teachers (Clark 2010; Molley *et al.* 2009; Ferfolja & Robinson 2004). This is mainly because 'curriculum intervention is [seen as] one possible strategy for the challenging of homophobia and heterosexism in schools' (Saunton 2013), and teachers are

often seen as important agents for changing school cultures. Given that schools are by their very nature heteronormative sites where sexuality becomes the primary structure for organising the experiences of teachers, learners and the school itself (Schmidt, Chang, Carolan-Silva, Lockart & Anagnostopoulos 2012; Ferfolja 2007; Athanases & Larrabee 2003), the schooling space is often heterosexualised. The effect of this heterosexualisation of space is often seen in the victimisation and bullying of students who claim non-normative sexual and gender identifications (Butler & Astbury 2004). Such bullying has prompted international bodies such as UNESCO, together with researchers in countries such as Australia, Ireland, United Kingdom, United States, Taiwan, New Zealand, France and South Africa, to seek strategies within teacher education to address the continued violence (see Schmidt *et al.* 2012; Clark 2010; Elia & Eliason 2010). However, even with all these efforts, Clark (2010: 711) notes that,

teachers [continue to be] woefully ill prepared to teach LGBTQ and non-gender confirming youth and to work against heterosexism and homophobia in schools.

In South Africa, despite constitutional provisions, homophobia remains a major problem generally (Human Rights Watch 2011; Mkhize, Bennett, Reddy & Moletsane, 2010) including in schools (Polders & Wells, 2004). Hate crimes involving the rape and murder of African 'lesbian' women mainly from townships are not uncommon (Bhana 2012). The homophobia experienced in general society often finds expression in schools (Bhana 2012; Francis 2012; Msibi 2012; Butler, Alpasan, Strumpher & Astbury 2003; Richardson 2006). Msibi (2012) has, for instance, noted that learners who engage in same-sex relations in South Africa experience discrimination, exclusion, violence, marginalisation and name-calling from both teachers and their peers. Bhana more recently (2013; 2014a) has shown that while the Constitution affirms all citizens, and appears to guarantee rights to students who claim same-sex identifications, principals and teachers are often unable to protect and support such learners as they are also part of those enacting homophobia.

Currently, efforts are underway to explore the possibilities of introducing an anti-homophobic bullying curriculum in several countries in Southern Africa. In 2012 and 2013, the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action

(GALA) led an initiative to bring together universities, educators, the government, funders and NGOs to engage on possible interventions to address homophobia in schools. This was mainly because both local and international literature suggests that educators are often hesitant to include same-sex issues in the curriculum, or deal with homophobia when it emerges in the classroom (Francis & Msibi 2011). This is in spite of the fact that many learners in fact do want to engage on non-normative sexual and gender diversity issues (Kirby & Michaelson 2008). Even in subjects like Life Orientation (LO) where there should be explicit teaching on these issues, teachers often avoid them or become very authoritarian and scripted when teaching them. In a study with 11 high school teachers from Durban for instance, Francis (2012) found that teachers avoided or ignored matters related to sexual diversity, often endorsing ideas of compulsory heterosexuality. The same was found by DePalma and Francis (2014a & b) in a study with 25 teachers from the Free State. These teachers, it was found, drew on religious ideals, policy, science and the Constitution, with an added emphasis on notions of culture, which wielded significant authority and was rigidly adopted when teaching about sexuality issues. Of course, this was not surprising. Francis (2012), citing Helleve *et al.* (2009: 598), notes that, ‘teachers’ cultural perceptions often mean that basic sexuality education content such as safe sex is not delivered effectively as teachers are more concerned that learners are sexually active ...’ than teaching openly about sexuality.

Also of concern is that even textbooks which are meant to introduce sexual and gender diversity issues are often blind to such issues or present them in less than affirming ways. Potgieter and Reygan (2012) in their study on grade 7-12 LO textbooks from four South African publishers found that there were inconsistencies and omissions in the representations of same-sex identities, with ‘gay’ identities at times presented, while ‘lesbian’ and ‘bisexual’ identities were being rarely ever presented. Transgender and intersex identities did not feature at all in the textbooks surveyed. The same has been confirmed elsewhere (see Wilmot & Naidoo 2014).

In light of the failure for schools to protect and support learners who claim same-sex identifications, Rofes (2005) asks an important question: ‘who is responsible for preparing teachers to respond to a fifteen-year-old lesbian who is harassed by peers?’ (p. 665). This is an important question as, very often, teachers leave universities unprepared to confront homophobia in

schools. However, higher education institutions are often themselves unable to handle these issues. Msibi (2013), for instance, decries the transformation discourse in South Africa for its exclusionary focus on race (and to a lesser extent gender) and for failing to recognise the complexities presented by intersections of various forms of identification. As Bhana (2013:116) aptly notes

Terrible acts of male violence and homophobia ... draw from longstanding notions of moral traditions premised upon heteropatriarchy, religion and culture and are steeped in South Africa's historical trajectories.

These intersections are often ignored in higher education transformation discourse, and reactions of horror and disgust are often aired when homophobia occurs, without asking what it is that institutions have done to curb this.

The challenges facing higher education institutions in South Africa in relation to the teaching of same-sex issues, particularly within teacher education programmes, have been highlighted in three seminal studies that have informed the field on same-sex teaching. First, Richardson's (2004) seminal work with pre-service teachers at the University of Witwatersrand highlighted the potential that explicit teaching offers in transforming the minds of students. Second, Francis and Msibi's (2011) study demonstrated the importance of creative approaches when teaching these challenging, often personal, issues. Finally, Potgieter, Reygan and Msibi (2014) have recently completed a study at the University of KwaZulu-Natal focussed on more than 800 pre-service and in-service teachers. The study highlighted the importance of teaching about same-sex issues not only for the improvement of the school conditions for non-normative gender and sexual identifications, but also for consciousness building among the student teachers. While these various interventions have gone some way in challenging and educating about homophobia, the interventions have not been adequate.

In a study commissioned by GALA on the need to understand and combat homophobia among student teachers, Johnson (2014) found that only three institutions, out of all the institutions with teacher education programmes in the country, offer explicit teaching on same-sex issues, and that even in those institutions, the programmes offered are not sufficient to

enable student teachers to apply their learning in their future classroom situations. While Johnson's paper presents a more etic understanding of the pedagogic practices present in teacher preparation programmes, it is this paper's contention that a more emic analysis may be useful to respond to some of the issues presented in Johnson's paper. This paper uses students' examination responses to explore their (students') thought processes in relation to the module content and possible future action in relation to dealing with homophobia in the classroom. The paper accepts that the exam responses may not necessarily present an accurate account of students' thinking, especially given that the students were writing for marks. However, given that the students' anonymity was guaranteed during the examination process, the paper holds that while the students' aim may have been for marks, certain phrases, words, and statements may be useful in making an inference on understanding and (possible) actions. Of course, as work on HIV/AIDS has shown, there's often a disjuncture between knowledge about something and change of behaviour (see Reddy 2005). This paper is therefore careful of pre-empting the future behaviour of the student-teachers on the basis of their exam responses.

The next section presents a discussion on the theoretical framework and the methodology adopted in the study. Details of the module are also presented. This is followed by a discussion on findings. I conclude by highlighting the implications of this paper for future research and practice related to the teaching of same-sex issues to pre-service teachers.

Theoretical Framing

Research focussed on the teaching of same-sex and gender non-conforming youth issues in teacher education programmes has generally focussed on three paradigms: safety, equity and critical paradigms (Szalacha 2004). The safety paradigm is a pre-emptive approach focussed on addressing school violence. Here, the concern is with 'protection from homophobic verbal taunts and physical violence, suicide prevention and AIDS/HIV education' (ibid: 69). While useful in combatting homophobia, the approach tends to position same-sex identifying or gender non-conforming young people as victims of abuse. The approach therefore fails to consider agency. The equity paradigm on the other hand is concerned with providing knowledge and skills

to pre-service teachers to teach everyone with respect. Focus is on full inclusion and citizenship, with teachers prepared to integrate same-sex issues into the curriculum. The intention is to ‘change, and not simply mirror, our society’ (Casper & Schultz 1999: 15, see also Szalacha 2004). Lastly, the critical paradigm is primarily concerned with critically examining all sexualities. It problematizes the other two paradigms for their heteronormative positionings, arguing instead that education should break away from the ‘normative’ into the realm of discomfort. As Kumashiro (2002) observes,

the desire to learn only what is comforting goes hand in hand with a resistance to learning what is discomforting, and this resistance often proves to be a formidable barrier to movements towards social justice (p. 4).

Education in this paradigm therefore asks educators ‘to examine school curricula and policies that normalize heterosexuality’ (Szalacha 2004).

Linked to the three paradigms is what Kumashiro (2002) refers to as the four approaches that researchers have used in conceptualising the nature of education and the curricula, pedagogies and policies needed for change. These approaches are *education for the other*, *education about the other*, *education that is critical of privileging and othering* and *education that changes students and society*. *Education for the other* focuses on improving the conditions and treatment of students who are ‘othered’. The approach prioritises the provision of helpful, affirming, supportive and empowering spaces for ‘othered’ groups. The strength of this approach is that it calls educators to recognise the diversity which exists among students, and its limitation is that it constructs those who are marginalised as problems, therefore ultimately fixing identities. This approach is mainly related to the safety paradigm discussed above. The second approach, *education about the other*, is mainly concerned with providing complete knowledge about groups which are ‘othered’. This is done through including specific units in the curriculum about the groups which are ‘othered’ and the integration of ‘otherness’ through the curriculum. The strength of this approach is that it calls educators to bring visibility to ignored issues, while the weaknesses include the essentialising of experience as shared by all those belonging to the group while constructing the ‘other’ as an expert. This approach is related

to the equity paradigm. The third approach, *education which is critical of othering*, focusses on how groups are marginalised and how some groups are normalised and privileged in society. It offers a critique and transformation of hegemonic structures and prioritises consciousness-raising and empowerment, leading to a process of unlearning. Its strength is that it calls educators, not just to teach about oppression, but to try and change society as well. Its weaknesses, on the other hand, include the fact that members of the same group do not all share the same experiences as the approach seems to claim. Additionally, it is important to note that awareness does not always lead to action (Kumashiro 2002). This approach therefore still relies on essentialised notions of identity construction. The last approach, *education that changes society*, acknowledges the discursive nature of oppression. It is built on the belief that discourse frames how people think, feel, act, and interact. It therefore appeals to marginalised theories like poststructuralism. It acknowledges that we are not only framed by what is said, but also what is not said. Therefore, it is important to labour to stop repetition and rework history and discourse (Kumashiro 2002).

For Kumashiro (2002), there is no one best approach to be followed. Rather, a combination of these approaches should be used by teacher educators to advance anti-oppressive education. Kumashiro (2002) acknowledges that oppression is multi-layered, multiple and situated. Therefore ‘both students and educators need to ‘look beyond’ existing theories and practices’ by going beyond the field into

postructuralism, feminist and queer readings of psychoanalysis, and other theories that remain marginalised and unexplored in the field of educational research (Kumashiro 2002: 23).

In South Africa, interventions that have sought to address oppression related to sexuality and gender non-conformity have mainly adopted either the safety paradigm or the equity paradigm. In the module discussed in this paper however, an explicit and intentional approach to utilise Kumashiro’s (2002) anti-oppressive pedagogy was followed. The educators in the module were mainly positioned as activists; this was, after all, the first time for an entire group of students to both be taught and examined on content explicitly focussed on same-sex issues. The education provided was therefore for those who are marginalised, about those who are marginalised, presented the

complexities of privilege and subordination, and prompted pre-service to change.

For this paper, I keep to the same approach followed in the class. I interrogate the students' responses on the basis of the type of pedagogy we presented in the classroom and ask whether the responses from the students reflect the complexity which our approach sought to prioritise, or whether they present elements of confusion which need to be addressed in the future designs of the module.

Module Structure

As already mentioned above, the module under exploration has, as its focus, the prioritisation of human rights, ethics and teacher professionalism. Three weeks were set aside to focus on key concepts in human rights education as well as human rights instruments. Here, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the African Charter on Human and People's Rights as well as the South African Bill of Rights were discussed. This was followed by four weeks on children's rights, with a focus on race, gender and sexual orientation. Finally, another four weeks focussed on teacher professionalism and ethical conduct. The approach was to draw on an eclectic list of readings depending on the nature of the discussion. For example, the human rights theoretical discussions drew from scholars such as Jack Donnelly and Bonny Ibhawoh while the anti-oppressive pedagogy espoused by Kumashiro (2002) formed the permeating approach to pedagogy. While this eclectic approach may be challenged given that human rights education approaches differ tremendously from social justice approaches espoused by Kumashiro, it is argued here that drawing from a mix of theoretical positions strengthened the module as the approach presented knowledge as complex and contested. In this way, students were not exposed to just one way of thinking, rather we sought to develop critical thinking by presenting various ways of thinking and presented knowledge dynamic. Kumashiro (2002:68) notes that

The unknowability involved in teaching requires that even anti-oppressive educators must constantly trouble our own practices and look beyond what we already know.

We therefore worked on the basis that what might work for one student may not work for the other and opened ourselves up to be questioned and challenged to learn, just like our students (Jansen 2009).

In this paper, I particularly focus on the four weeks dedicated to children's rights. During these four weeks, the focus was on four different aspects. The first week was on providing theory on children's rights as well as related instruments. This was then followed by two (90 minute) sessions each on race, followed by another two on gender and finally another two on sexual orientation. We deliberately started with discussions on race, as very often our students find it easier to identify issues related to racism compared to sexual orientation. Discussions on race also offered the theoretical foundations needed for discussions of the more complex issues surrounding gender and sexuality. We also wanted to present oppression and identification as intersectional, therefore avoiding the victim/perpetrator discourse which often characterises teaching on these issues.

Given that all 661 students registered for the compulsory module had to learn the same material across all groups, designs explicitly explaining the outcomes for each section as well as the actions of teachers and approaches to be followed were given to each staff member. While some may view this as too rigid, I argue that it is very important for teachers teaching sensitive issues to be fully prepared as sensitive issues often yield unpredictable classrooms. While preparation may not guarantee flow and exactness, it does nevertheless assist teachers to deal competently with sensitive issues.

For the session on race, we presented introductory notes on race and its relevance to South Africa today. This was followed by a session focussed on Jonathan Jansen's article on post-conflict theory (2009). Here students were introduced to the idea of 'bitter knowledge' – problematic, stereotypical received knowledge that we carry about groups which are 'othered'. The session also explored current experiences of racism in South African schools and the responsibility of teachers in addressing racism.

The next week focussed on gender. Here, the first session focused on terminology. Using Judith Butler's (1990) work, differences between gender, sex and sexuality were discussed alongside the concepts of heteronormativity, homophobia, sexism and heterosexism. After troubling the students' received knowledge, the next session moved to a familiar discussion on the relevance of gender issues in South Africa today, especially given the notions of women empowerment espoused in the Constitution. A discussion on the

article by Nkosi (2009) on *ukuthwala* (bride abduction) was then presented.

The final two sessions centred on sexual orientation. Here, the first session presented a discussion on homophobia in SA, connecting to terms discussed in previous sessions and drawing links to the systemic nature of oppression while using examples from racism and sexism. In order to interrogate students' ideas about sexuality and their responsibility as future teachers in protecting all learners, the second session focusses on a DVD called 'We all count'. The DVD presents the voices of teachers, learners and university students on their experiences of homophobia in schools and the need to address such homophobia. Participants represent a range of sexualities, highlighting that one ought not be same-sex identifying to address homophobia and heterosexism. A pastor also features in the DVD, speaking about the need for Christianity to accept sexual and gender diversity. After the DVD, students were referred to an article by Msibi on the experiences of 'queer' youth in township schools for further reading.

The various aspects covered in the module were assessed during the semester through two assignments, and an exam at the end of the semester. The two assignments were related in that the first one was a minor assignment presenting a brief visual and conceptual understanding of a human rights issue chosen by individual students; after written feedback from lecturers, the minor assignment was developed into a full written paper for the major assignment. The focus of this paper is not on the assignments but exclusively on the exam written at the end of the semester.

Methodology

As stated above, 661 students were registered for the module. Of the 661 students, 464 (70.2%) were African, 148 (23.4%) were Indian, 24 (3.4%) were white, 24 (3.6%) were coloured and 1 identified him/herself as 'other'. The class was 67% female and 33% male. The students were predominantly from rural areas and were taught by eight lecturers of different races, genders and sexual orientations.

For the exam, the students were given six questions, with the expectation that they select one question for each aspect of the module (i.e. 3 questions were to be answered by each student in total). Question one and

two dealt with theories on human rights, questions three and four dealt with children's rights and questions five and six dealt with teacher professionalism and ethics. For this paper, I focus on the section on children's rights, in particular question 4, which dealt with sexual orientation. Given the fact that this was the first time ever, in the history of the module, that students were expected to choose a question focused on sexual orientation, I expected very few students to write on this question. It also did not help that the students knew that the module coordinator (the author) was an expert on same-sex issues, and would therefore be marking the question. I was therefore very surprised that 286 students (43%) had chosen this question over a less controversial question 3 on children's rights. On its own, this already suggested something about the improving attitudes of students when it comes to same-sex issues.

My analysis involved the collection and reading of all exam scripts responding to Question 4. In the question, students were required to identify factors which contribute to the continuation of homophobia in schools and to propose interventions that they would launch when in schools the following year to curb homophobia. After re-reading the scripts, key codes were identified related to students' independent thinking in response to the question. Key repeated codes were then clustered together to formulate categories. Categories that spoke to each other were grouped together, with themes emerging from the grouped categories. Arguments were then established on the basis of the identified themes. This approach was in line with Spencer, Ritchie and O'Corner's (2003) analytical hierarchy. Overall four themes were identified. I now present these in the findings below. The analysis presented here is purely qualitative and where direct quotations are used, students' seat numbers are presented.

Findings

Four main themes emerged from the analysis of examination scripts: importance of teaching appropriate terminologies and relevant content; students as activists: creative approaches for the classroom; role of teacher professionalism in intervening, and the asexual teacher discourse.

Importance of Teaching Appropriate Terminologies and Relevant Content

The importance of teaching terminologies in work related to same-sex issues is not something new. O'Malley *et al.* (2009) note that such an approach is mainly tied to the deconstruction and complication of

simplistic and dualistic understanding of men and women, homosexuality and heterosexuality and thus intervenes in the discursive normalization of heterosexuality (p. 97).

This approach is aligned with Kumashiro's (2002) notion of education that is critical of 'othering' and is particularly important in the South African context where notions of 'our culture' take on rigid meanings (see DePalma & Francis, 2014b). In this study, it appeared from the students' responses that the explicit teaching on the various terminologies and associated complications worked to produce students who were informed about same-sex issues. For instance, most students sought to demonstrate understanding by drawing on, and correctly using, appropriate terminologies in their discussions, even though the question did not require the students to do this. Students used terms such as heterosexuality, sexual orientation, gay, lesbian, queer, transgender, social construction, masculinity, patriarchy, among others, with clarity and accuracy. Often, reference was made to the classroom discussions when such terminologies were used. Many students had sentences such as 'like we discussed in class...' or 'in the documentary we saw in class....' Such discussions were often detailed, demonstrating not only comprehension of what was discussed in class, but also independent thinking in the process of writing. Often, reference was made to the video watched in class as well as readings and debates. Examples of this are evident in the following captions:

As a Christian I learnt from the DVD to respect gay and lesbian people because I now understand that sex, gender and sexuality are not the same. I thought gay people wanted to be like women (016)

Like the DVD, I hope for my learners to also challenge homophobia and heterosexism in schools. (088)

From their responses, it becomes clear that students' effective use of terminologies was linked to the structure of the module as constant reference was being made to the learning and key activities undertaken in class. Such responses suggest that the use of creative strategies to teach about same-sex issues including lectures, visual media like DVDs and class debates had worked to concretise the learning of students and also aided their understanding of terminologies beyond the cultural and religious frames. Francis and Msibi (2011) note the importance of using creative participatory approaches in the facilitation of learning when dealing with controversial issues.

While many of the students were able to utilise the terminologies and concepts with great effect, it became clear that some students still did not have a full grasp of the complexity of sexuality, and were appealing to stereotypical constructions of sexuality. Some students, for instance, made statements such as 'gay people are smart' or 'gay people abuse drugs because of victimisation'. Note, for example, one of the responses from a student:

most of them [gay individuals] are the drug users because of the money they have and sometimes they get into drugs because of the people around them for example when people violate them, they distress with alcohol and drugs in order to forget about the discrimination (239).

The response above demonstrates just how dangerous the safety discourse may be in essentialising behaviour while also pathologising same-sex identification. The student's assertions at a cursory level seek to highlight the challenges encountered by individuals who claim same-sex identification: that victimisation may result in substance abuse, as some suicide studies have shown (see Savin-Williams 1994). However, deeper scrutiny shows that this supposed concern clouds internalised homophobia from the student. Note for instance the reference to 'them' and the idea that this is not just a small group of people affected in this way, but rather, it is 'most of them'. The stereotype that gay individuals have money appears not complimentary, but rather hides deep-seated envy and problematic constructions of behaviours associated with same-sex sexuality. Of course the idea that same-sex identifying individuals have money circulates in much of the public discourse on same-

sex issues in South Africa (see Msibi 2013). The above declaration from the cited student demonstrates just how such notions work to reinforce homophobia instead of disrupting it. Empathy alone is not adequate to address discrimination as that empathy may actually be the base from which homophobia can emanate.

Apart from the stereotypical positioning, there appears to have been a number of language problems which prevented some students from understanding some of the key concepts. Given that the majority of students were second language speakers of English, it appeared that the language and terminology used in the module was restricting students' abilities to understand some of the concepts taught. For instance, statements such as these were not uncommon:

Homophobia needs to be implemented in schools (209)

Heterosexuality individuals believe in homophobic (306)

Queer means strange. That means gay people are strange (153)

... someone who is sexually oriented (257)

The above statements suggest that the English language, together with the Western nature of the theoretical concepts taught, may have prevented some students from understanding. This, of course, may not be surprising given that in a study involving more than 1000 individuals from South Africa including young people, police and general members of a community in Johannesburg, less than 5% of the individuals surveyed associated the concept of homosexuality with same-sex identification (Sigamoney & Epprecht 2013), pointing to the unworkability of Western concepts in South Africa. What was surprising in this study is that the individuals who wrote the exam were enrolled to become teachers and were in their final year of study, suggesting an established exposure to the English language. If some students who are exposed to the language struggle to understand important concepts associated with same-sex desire, one wonders how those outside the education fraternity are able to understand. This points therefore to the need to interrogate more substantially the concepts we teach our students so as to Africanise them. This is an important aspect which much of the literature has not seriously taken into account.

Students as Activists: Creative Approaches for the Classroom

In a recently-released study on teacher preparation modules that focussed on same-sex and gender non-conformity issues in South Africa, Johnson (2014) argues that while the programmes she surveyed were useful in providing an understanding of same-sex issues for students, these programmes did not appear to enable students to apply their knowledge in the classroom situation. Contrary to the findings by Johnson, the examination scripts, which required students to write critically about how they intend to challenge homophobia in their classrooms, demonstrated a heightened awareness of issues, together with an entrenched commitment to address homophobia in future classroom situations. While one may not be able to provide direct evidence of students' actions in relation to this, as one would need to visit the students in their classrooms to observe their future actions, the fact that students demonstrated such heightened awareness suggests that some students had the potential of becoming activists (Kumashiro 2002) and were demonstrating a keen interest in challenging homophobia in future. That students could, for instance, send me messages after seeing a television programme focused on homophobia, suggests that students had become adequately sensitised about these matters and were keenly hoping to change their social and potential schooling conditions. This was confirmed by what the student wrote in the examination.

Many students suggested the use of media (like *Generations*), videos and debates to promote inclusion of same-sex identifying learners in schools. Interestingly, *Generations* (a local soapie on SABC 1) was suggested by many students as a possible avenue to be used to challenge homophobia. This is because this programme had positive representation of the gay and bisexual characters in it. Other students highlighted the integration of same-sex issues beyond Life Orientation. One of the students, for example, noted that '*As a language educator I can use an exercise about marriage where learners summarise an article and use two people of the same-sex. Indirectly the learners would be exposed to information or incidences which queer people encounter on a daily basis.*' (244). Other students suggested a stand-alone subject, while others suggested a more constructive use of LO, given that many teachers avoided teaching same-sex sexuality issues appropriately (DePalma & Francis 2014; Francis 2012). Some students also highlighted the possibility of establishing support groups which include both same-sex identifying youth and 'heterosexual' youth as a possible strategy. These

suggestions by students demonstrate that they not only did not see the teaching about same-sex and gender non-conformity as being the sole responsibility of LO teachers, but rather that they could locate themselves within this expectation. This suggests that these teachers no longer saw matters related to sexuality as requiring avoidance, but rather that they understood the important role played by teachers in ensuring change. Kumashiro (2002) writes that

antioppressive reading/learning/teaching practices do not aim to merely change the ways we read others. They also aim to change the ways we read ourselves. They aim to queer the very sense of self (p. 108).

These responses therefore suggest that the pre-service teachers did not separate the sensitisation that had occurred in class from their individual actions. Rather, they saw the change that had occurred in themselves as a trigger for further change that ought to happen in schools. This was evident in their responses as noted here:

I can use words like partner when referring to two people together (252);

Words like *stabane* (*faggot*) should not be allowed (238)

correct information must be provided to learners because learners come to class with negative information (188)

...in school there must be anti-homophobia awareness days e.g. like anti-bullying day. There must be sexual orientation policy and there must be posters around the school showing anti-homophobia (240)

If I didn't do Education Studies 420, I would have gone to school next year with my bad ideas. How many teachers go to schools believing that gay people are possessed (290)

We need government to provide books that will enable teachers to teach about these issues (061)

....I plan to go to deep rural areas as well, because nobody ever goes to those areas and yet we expect the same understanding as the people from townships who have access to information. I believe it is unfair...I want to create relations with communities as to gain their trust first...not to say there will be no education at school, but I believe at school I will have more platform to model the appropriate attitude than I will have with communities (302)

The above responses from students not only suggest that deep learning had occurred, they also suggest that the pre-service teachers understood the complexity surrounding the teaching of same-sex issues. Bhana (2013) highlights the role that parents play in resisting the teaching of same-sex issues, often appealing to heteronormative discourses. The student's suggestion of the need to teach beyond the classroom environment, like going to rural areas, comes from an understanding that parents are instrumental in the transmission of *bitter knowledge*, and are therefore crucial for effective school change. While not explicitly studied in class, the students were also able to make connections to the dearth of appropriate content on same-sex sexualities in existing texts (see Potgieter & Reygan 2012), thus their reference to the need for government to produce textbooks which are relevant and appropriate. Such a heightened awareness is not simply about sensitisation. It suggests that students had received an education that could possibly lead to social change. This is further evident in the next theme where students' professional responsibilities were referred to as possible avenues for which same-sex teaching could be pursued.

Role of Teacher Professionalism in Intervening

Existing research into practices of teachers suggests that teachers are often complicit in the victimisation of students who engage in same-sex relations (see Bhana 2013; Msibi 2012) and that such teachers often appeal to their cultural and religious values in their rejection of same-sex desire. Like O'Malley (2009: 95), our intentions for this module were to

work with many religiously and politically traditional and fundamen-

talist students ... not to change or denigrate their religious, cultural, or political beliefs.

Rather we wanted to explore intently issues of identification ‘within the democratic spaces of schools and society’ (ibid). We therefore worked directly with students to address their religious and cultural apprehensions by appealing to their ethical and professional responsibilities. Judging from the students responses, this intersectional approach worked as many of the students emphasised their professional role as teachers to promote gender equality and challenge homophobia, with many directly making reference to the professional code of ethics. While the lack of policy directly dealing with same-sex issues at a basic education level has been decried by scholars as restricting, the responses from the students suggest that they believe that schools need to work within the existing policy frameworks to generate their own policies as both the Constitution and the South African Schools Act are clear in their repudiation of discrimination in whatever form. Instead of placing the policy challenge at the door of government, the students seem to suggest that it is their own professional responsibility as teachers to ensure that all sexualities and gender diversities are accepted and included within the schooling space. Note for instance the captions of the students’ responses:

Teachers need to have an open mind (008)

Teachers need to act immediately against homophobia to nip it in the bud (282)

Professionalism requires putting own views like religion aside (172, 244)

What we teach is not what matters, it’s what we do (252)

Teachers need to change their attitudes (233)

The above captions suggest a clear deviation from the usual discourses which emanate from teachers when asked about same-sex issues. This suggests here a different type of teacher; one that sees the inclusion and acceptance of every learner in the school as his or her own concern. Of course, some may dispute this claim given the existing research in teacher professional

development which suggests that pre-service teachers have naïve ideas about the teaching profession, therefore suggesting that these ideas may change when the pre-service teachers start teaching. While this may be the case, the responses of these students appear to be in direct contrast to existing literature on the teaching of same-sex issues to other pre-service teachers (see Johnson, 2014; Zack, Maaheim & Alfano 2010). The students' responses suggest a deep commitment and willingness to drive an agenda for change.

A concern however is that some students appeared again to espouse an approach based on tolerance as opposed to full citizenship and acceptance. Note for example some of the responses from students:

some people say according to the Bible it is wrong, yes I agree but who said that you are perfect as if you don't do any other wrong thing. In God's eye all sins are equal so being judgemental is wrong too (313)

we need to keep peace in our country, no matter what we think about it (241)

Teachers must swallow their pride. It's not easy, but they have to (038)

What these responses suggest is that some students still continue to see same-sex engagement as 'sinful', something which should be accepted merely to keep the peace. Of course, this may not be surprising given the deep entrenchment of religion in the psyche of the South African nation. While these responses should raise some concern, they do nevertheless present a reality that teacher educators committed to social justice should accept. As already mentioned, our teaching will not reach our students in the same way, and shifts and movements in thinking will not occur in a similar way for all students. That many students demonstrate a heightened awareness and willingness to change the schooling space should, I argue, be sufficient to demonstrate potential for change.

The Asexual Teacher Discourse

While our approach was to adopt a more critical paradigm, borrowing mainly

from Kumashiro's (2002) anti-oppressive education, the analysis of the exam suggests that the module may not have sufficiently enabled students to trouble their own sexual identifications. Very often students avoided the presentation of their own sexual identifications, often choosing to refer to 'the other'. Words such as 'them', 'they', 'these people', 'queer people' featured strongly in the responses from students. Note for instance below:

They need to be respected because everyone deserves respect (056)

Gay learners should be supported. These people are like anyone else (330)

This came as a surprise given that at least 10% of the student group could be assumed to have been same-sex identifying (see Richardson 2009). What this suggests is that our approach tended to prioritise education 'about the other'. The students continued to view teachers as asexual and did not interrogate their own sexualities. Given the urgent need to address homophobia in South Africa, together with the limitations in the time given to teach, I suggest that perhaps our designs and the environment created did not enable the students to openly claim same-sex identification. In spaces where lecturers were teaching anything between 80 and 100 students per group, it was difficult to adequately design lessons which enable students to directly grapple with their own sexualities. There are examples above which suggest that some students were able to interrogate themselves in the process of learning. However, such examples are clearly limited, suggesting the need to pay more attention on this aspect moving forward.

What Lessons can we Learn from these Responses?

There are several implications that this study has for future research and practice. A clear point is that a study premised on the analysis of examination papers can provide an indication about the thinking of our students pertaining to the controversial issues we teach. Very often similar research is premised on course evaluations and interview data. However, from the analysis of examination papers, this paper has been able to identify some important observations from the students' responses on their understanding of the

material taught as well as possibilities for the teaching offered for future interventions in school. This is important data as, very often, interviews may only reveal students' thoughts patterns, not the level of understanding of the materials taught. Through the analysis of examination responses, more in-depth data has therefore been gained.

This method clearly has limitations, not least the fact that students were writing the exam for marks and may have therefore written their responses to gain marks. Additionally, the data drawn only represents a segment of the student population who chose question 4. It could be argued that those students who chose the topic were already supportive of same-sex issues, therefore an important segment of the student population was left out in the analysis process. While indeed such claims can be made, that such a significant number of students chose to pursue the question is data on its own. It is suggesting a possible gradual change in the attitudes of the students we teach. It would, of course, still be interesting to interview those students who opted not to write this question to enquire about the reasons for their disinterest.

There are also important lessons that emerged from the data in relation to the structure and content of the module. While the module sought to present an education that captures the four approaches to teaching anti-oppressive education, it is clear that our content did not adequately interrogate the students' own subjective identifications. This in part can be explained by the students' inability to focus on the teacher-self as sexual. This points to the need for the module to move beyond only the provision of knowledge, to enabling students to locate their own sexualities in the learning process. The challenge however is how this can be enabled in large class environments where homophobia is a daily reality for students. It is argued here then that this perhaps calls for varied approaches to teaching, particularly the need for the creation of smaller classes. This has further implications for the time allocated for such teaching, as very often teaching on same-sex issues requires consistent reinforcement.

Another important aspect that this study highlights is the need for an investment on the development of local languages to enable students to understand the content of the modules taught. It is clear from the above discussion that language can be a hindrance to understanding. While this may not be an immediate concern for contexts where English is the first language, being able to explain phenomena in the language that students understand

may assist to shift students' thinking from confusion, to interrogating the content in a language they can understand. As argued elsewhere (see Msibi 2013), the continued confusion of 'gay' to be synonymous with wanting to be a woman needs to be sufficiently troubled. This can only happen when students can understand Butler's heterosexual matrix in a language that they can comprehend.

Finally, it is clear that the fear that many teacher educators have about the teaching of same-sex issues is often unfounded. Done sensitively, the teaching of controversial issues such as same-sex identification and gender non-conformity can go some way towards empowering pre-service teachers to be better informed and therefore able to support same-sex identifying students at school, while also able to challenge their own homophobia and heterosexism. As Kumashiro (2002) notes, anti-oppressive education should create 'new, activist possibilities [so that] students can be and become' (p. 201). This paper therefore opens further research and practice possibilities for the development of the field to ensure the process of 'being' and 'becoming'.

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