

Rethinking Gender and Sexuality in Education

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Abstract

In this short article, the authors argue that gender and sexuality, considered different concepts in gender studies, are so intertwined that differentiating between the two may cause the exclusion of many gender identities in education regardless of being fit into the male or female spectrum. LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) people together with other gender identities should be included in education; otherwise, these people and their needs in educational settings may be overlooked.

Keywords: Gender, Education, Feminism, LGBT, Sexuality

Gender identity and sexual orientation are predominant in every human being's life. People may experience discrimination on the grounds of gender and/or sexual orientation at different stages in their life. Discrimination based on gender and sexuality occurs on a daily basis in different arenas including educational settings. An extensive literature exists on the importance of gender and sexuality in education (Bruess & Greenberg, 2004; Klein, 2007), gender and sexuality in education, however, should be examined in depth. In the following sections, basic concepts existing within the boundaries of gender, sexuality, and education will be explored in more details. Initially, the authors in the present article would like to embark upon the issues surrounding gender and sexuality in conjunction with feminist viewpoints given that feminism plays a central role in gender discussion.

1. Feminism, sex and gender:

Feminists are classified under two headings: gender feminists and equity feminists (Speer, 2005). Equity feminism contends that male and females may have different roles in the family, but in the workplace, they should be paid equally and they should have equal economic rights for the same work. However, gender feminism debates the equality of women and men in social roles. Gender feminism proposed the idea of a distinction between sex and gender (Speer, 2005). They believe that while sex is biologically determined, gender is a social construction whereby sexed bodies are constantly engaged in processes of construction and re-construction (Colebrook, 2004). While the idea was helpful in refuting the argument that women are born with a certain number of limitations, it nevertheless can result in gender dichotomy.

2. Masculinity vs. Femininity:

As Sunderland (2004) convincingly argues, the true meaning of manhood and womanhood cannot be totally realized in individuals. People abide by varying degrees to the idealized socio-cultural beliefs of masculinity and femininity. Thus, as the authors of the current article propose, in education there is a great deal of emphasis on equality between men and women, hence, an educational curriculum should incorporate all individual differences. Another issue of considerable concern is the sexual preferences of students. Even if all gender equality aspects between men and women are considered in educational settings, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students who do not fit into the man/woman dichotomy will still be discriminated.

3. Gender and sexuality

Sexual orientation per se, as Greenfield (2005) proposes, supports “heteronormative hegemony” (p. 2), and sexual preferences are considered to be deviations from masculine hegemony, which regards heterosexuality as the norm. Noticeably, one can infer from Greenfield’s argument that heterosexuality is considered by default sexuality and LGBT people and their sexual orientation are considered deviation from the social norm. The masculine hegemonic worldview, simply explained, denotes the supremacy of heterosexuality and the suppression of LGBT people or whatever seems contrary to this worldview.

As Bruce Bagemihl (1999) reports in his book entitled “Biological Exuberance,” homosexuality is the predominant form of intercourse for more than 450 species. This is evidence that sexual preferences relate to hormones rather than to what the normative heterosexual society may classify as a “perversion.” As Fausto-Sterling (2000) argues, even the most fundamental knowledge about sex is shaped by culture; thus, LGBT people are those men and women whose sexual orientations and personality traits do not conform to deep-rooted gender bias and societal convictions, which endorse heteronormativity and certain forms of masculinity and femininity.

LGBT people and gender identities are circumscribed and constrained by gender stereotypes and biases. The only divergence between is that LGBT people are not only inharmonious with gender stereotypes—just as other citizens—but are also struggling for their sexual orientation and gender identities under the shadow of these gender stereotypes. Maurer & Plante (2009) argue that in this world, human beings come in a range of forms; therefore, it is inaccurate to categorize all human beings into two classes; namely that of “men” and “women.” Hence, in gender studies, focusing on men and other sexualities in tandem with women’s issues support the possibility that all human beings are aware of the socialized gender inequality regardless of whether they fit into conventional men or women categories.

As Speer (2005) and Callahan (2009) strongly argue, the gender/sex dichotomy may lead to the bipolar dichotomy of men and women. This may be to the fact that a discussion of the biological elements of that dichotomy has been omitted in the context of the gender/sex distinction (Speer, 2005). Therefore, with regards to the intersex phenomenon, this omission poses a challenge to the gender/sex dichotomy advanced by feminist theories (Maurer & Plante, 2009; Callahan, 2009).

While the ideas of feminism and equality between men and women are very constructive, one should be aware of the fact that women and men (and femininity and masculinity) constitute the two extremes of a continuum. As Callahan (2009) explains, all human beings are inter-sexed. For this reason, if society desires to be egalitarian, one should combat all forms of bias against gender identities regardless of one’s biological sex and sexual orientations or whether one falls into the category of male or female. Eventually, with this mindset, one shall find it easier to include the LGBT community in the larger consideration of gender issues, because LGBTs perform alternative forms of masculinity and femininity. When contemplating Fausto-Sterling’s (2000) argument concerning the significance of cultural norms and social mores in shaping sexual orientation, LGBT individuals provide different sexual orientations which emerge amidst present hetero-normative social beliefs (Greenfield, 2005).

4. The Significance of Gender and Sexuality in Education

Harassment or discrimination in schools on the basis of sexual orientation occurs on a daily basis (GLSEN, 2009). Many public schools are committed to providing an excellent educational environment for every child. To this end, schools should be free of intimidation and harassment (National Education Association, 2006). Every child deserves a learning environment without experiencing harassment (National Education Association, 2006). Considering LGBT students and their rights in education could provide such students with the opportunity to become visible in a small social unit; namely schools and educational settings. Other students together with their teachers may also become aware of the possibility that they can live study and work in a small social unit of their schools while respecting the rights of LGBT students. Once LGBT students are included in educational settings, students and teachers could criticize heteronormativity with more confidence and those gender beings who are not certain about their sexuality would not feel awkward about not having heterosexual orientation. Additionally, LGBT students could report any sexual harassment that they experience, observe, hear about, or believe may be occurring to school authorities with more ease. By doing so, LGBT students feel more secured in learning environments and could social more with other students. Once LGBT are more active in the learning environment, other students could experience more interactions with people having different sexual preferences. will not only strengthen the learning environment, but one will also provide a safe learning environment for each child—regardless of the child’s sexual preference. In an educational setting, equality between male and female students should be coupled with the consideration of the sexual preferences of each gender identity as well.

It should be noted that representing LGBT students and their rights in school textbooks and syllabuses, teacher training programs, and sex education programs are potential ways to make such students more visible in educational settings. To this end, future lines of gender studies in educational settings must be sensitive to LGBT students and their rights. Qualitative and quantitative studies are essential to deepen an understanding concerning this group of students. Detailed interviews would extend current insights about the current status of such students in educational settings. Further investigation can be directed towards school textbooks, teacher training and sex education programs run at schools to determine whether LGBTs have visibility in such venues.

In summary, if one focuses on the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality, all these possibilities in education may emerge to help improve the learning environment of LGBT students. It is hoped that this will extend such an outcome to society at large. Schools have always been a microcosm of society, since "...the problems of society enter the schoolhouse; they do not remain outside" (Tirozzi & Uro, 1997, p. 248). Educational settings are an important venue to consider when embarking on new endeavors aimed at addressing many social problems in broader society (Dewey, 2007; Wood & Richardson, 2000).

Gender and sexuality are arguably connected to many social issues (Reid, 1992); thus by including LGBT students in education and respecting their rights in educational settings, one could have a better society in the future given that children at schools are future citizens of every country. Once students' consciousness level regarding other sexual orientations is raised, our future societies would be a better place to live.

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