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Still an issue? Teacher educators, teacher education and heteronormativity.

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Background

This paper discusses and reflects on the findings of two research projects, both related to sexual orientation and teacher education. Project One was conducted in 2003 (Fisher, Carpenter and Tetley, 2003), and the most recent, Project Two, was conducted in 2009 (Visibility and Inclusion Project). Both projects were conducted on the same New Zealand teacher education site, with some participants possibly responding to both studies. Between 2003 and 2009, the former Auckland College of Education amalgamated with the University of Auckland. Arguably one would expect such an amalgamation to result in a more critical and accepting stance regarding social justice, and sexual orientation in particular. This is what we were attempting to ascertain with our comparison and analysis.

Each project examined, albeit in slightly different ways, staff attitudes and perceptions of diversity in sexual orientation, and the visibility and inclusion of all sexual orientations in teacher education curriculum. Common question themes in both projects addressed the ways in which the faculty environments and practices were perceived to be inclusive or otherwise of sexual diversity.

Pollack (1994) challenges gay and lesbian lecturers in tertiary institutions to act as 'out' role models in order to address the balance for young students who have grown up facing discrimination and a lack of acceptance from families. Page and Liston (2002) argue that all teacher educators of all sexualities should accept that part of their responsibility is to ensure that the concerns of students of diverse sexualities are addressed to promote acceptance. It should not be left up to staff with a vested interest in such issues to take responsibility for questioning hegemonic practices that promote heteronormativity.

References:

Fisher, D., Carpenter, V. M., & Tetley, P. (2003). "Is this really an issue?": Institutional heterosexism in a college of education (Monograph/Research Report Series No. 5). Auckland: Auckland College of Education.

Page, J. A., & Liston, D. D. (2002). Homophobia in the schools: Student teachers' perspective and preparation to respond. In R. M. Kisson (Ed.), *Getting ready for Benjamin: Preparing teachers for sexual diversity in the classroom* (pp. 71-80). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Pollack, J. (1994). Lesbian/gay models in the classroom: Where are they when you need them? In L. Garber (Ed.), *Tilting the tower* (pp. 131-134). New York: Routledge.

Research Questions

Project One examined the policies of Auckland College of Education on sexual orientation; staff attitudes towards diversity in sexual orientation; and the visibility of gay, lesbian and bisexual lecturers.

Project Two asked how visible (or 'out') teacher education staff and students of all sexual orientations were in the Faculty of Education, the University of Auckland. It also asked in what ways the Faculty teacher education environment, and practices, were inclusive of sexual diversity.

This paper reflects on and discusses the combined findings from Projects One and Two. Our analysis revolves around an issue of social justice: the pervasive and hegemonic heteronormativity identified in

teacher education programmes during 2003 which appears to be ongoing in 2009. The published findings may contribute to institutional and individual action/agency.

Methods

We, the two authors of this paper, are 'out' as lesbian teacher educators. We are amongst the fewer than 10 people amongst 144 teacher education lecturers who, currently, feel safe enough to be 'out' in the Faculty of Education, the University of Auckland. We acknowledge, are comfortable with, and proud of our sexualities. We appreciate that our positioning inevitably results in bias; steps were therefore taken in both projects to ensure validity by including heterosexual colleagues in various aspects of the research processes.

Both projects had full ethical approval from the respective institutions, and in both cases institutional funding was sought and granted. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies - mixed methods (Cresswell, 2006) - were employed in both cases.

Project One's methods took the form of a survey questionnaire which was distributed in hard copy to 223 teacher education (secondary, primary, early childhood education) staff. 17 questions were included, including those of a personal nature. 71 surveys were returned, a response rate of 31.8%.

For Project Two, Part One invited teacher education staff (secondary, primary, early childhood education) to complete an on line, anonymous survey questionnaire. 144 requests were emailed; 35 responded, a response rate of 24.3%. Survey results partially informed the questions asked in Part Two. Part Two consisted of two focus group interviews (one with two self identified heterosexual staff members and the other with three members of the Faculty Staff Rainbow network).

For each project, analysis involved a rigorous process of identifying and analyzing themes, and triangulation. A similar analysis was undertaken with the comparison of both projects' findings.

Reference:

Cresswell, J.W (2006) Using mixed method-sequential explanatory design - from theory to practice. *Field Methods*, 18(1) 3-20

Frame

Groups who are seen as 'marginalised' often desire to fit in, to not stand out as different (Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2006). The effects of 'normalisation' on those seen as 'different' is a significant area of inquiry (Morris, 2005) and provides understandings about the areas of concern for LGBTTTQI people in education.

Robinson and Ferfolja (2004) examine teacher educators and their dispositions concerning anti-homophobic and anti-heterosexist work. The researchers describe curriculum possibilities for teacher education, and maintain opportunities are not taken up because of hegemonic and heteronormative practices. Heteronormativity is a vital concept because of the pervasiveness of heterosexual expectations in all areas of people's lives (Warner, 1993). While heteronormativity results in the 'othering' of all who do not identify as heterosexual, the prevalence of education campaigns that attempt to address homophobia are of concern as they can lead to greater levels of discrimination and a lack of safety (Macintosh, 2007).

Sexualities is the area of diversity least likely to be addressed in teacher education (Surtees, 2006, Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004), yet it is a vital area to address for student well-being.

References:

Ferfolja, T., & Robinson, K. H. (2004). Why anti-homophobia in teacher education? Perspectives from Australian teacher educators. *Teaching Education*, 15(1), 9-25.

Macintosh, L. (2007). Does anyone have a band-aid? Anti-homophobia discourses and pedagogical impossibilities. *Educational Studies: Journal of the American Educational Studies Association*, v41, n1, pp.33-43.

Morris, M. (2005). Queer life and school culture: Troubling genders. *Multicultural Education*, 12 (3), 8-13.

Robinson, K., & Ferfolja, T. (2004). Playing it up, playing it down, playing it safe: queering teacher education. *Teaching and teacher education*, 24, 846-858.

Robinson, K. H., & Jones-Diaz, C. J. (2006). *Diversity and difference in early childhood education: Issues for theory and practice*. New York: Open University Press.

Surtees, N. (2006). Queering the hetero(norm) in research: Unsettling notions of the sexual other. In C. Mutch (Ed.), *Challenging the notion of "other"* (pp. 63-81). Wellington, New Zealand: NZCER.

Warner, M. (1993). "Introduction." In M. Warner (Ed.), *Fear of a queer planet: Queer politics and social theory*, (pp. vii-xxxi). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Research findings

This paper contributes to a body of knowledge surrounding issues of sexual orientation in teacher education (Sears, 2005, Ferfolja & Robinson, 2004). The findings have implications for teacher education in the international context and our goal is to publish the findings for that wider audience.

New Zealand has, arguably, some of the world's most liberal and inclusive national policies surrounding sexual orientation and inclusiveness (see the Human Rights Act, 1993). The paper suggests that, despite the policy rhetoric, there was and is minimal recognition of sexual orientation diversity in the University of Auckland's teacher education programmes. While such silence impacts on teacher education students and lecturers themselves, the ramifications multiply when one considers the wider educational environment in which teacher education students will work. Teacher education is a place where misconceptions and prejudices are able to be challenged.

The comparison of both projects indicates that little has changed; heteronormativity appears entrenched in teacher education. Projects One and Two provide evidence of discrimination against LGB staff. Many staff who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual continue to feel a sense of loneliness and danger and are uncomfortable about being open about their sexuality. In teacher education courses the curriculum topic of diversity did not and does not usually include diverse sexualities. In 2009, although some staff considered that there was adequate course content in regard to sexualities, many did not. While some were inclusive of sexualities in their teaching, others saw no relevance of the topic to their curriculum work and most ignored any reference.

Rather than confronting homophobia, teacher educators - in New Zealand and internationally - have a responsibility to challenge the pervasive power of heteronormativity. Through consistently questioning and 'queering' the construct of heterosexuality as 'normal', teacher educators can enable possibilities for discussion that are often ignored when the focus is on homophobia.

We argue that the evidence of little change in staff attitudes and practices is a serious matter for teacher education in the Faculty of Education; it is an issue of social justice.

References:

Ferfolja, T., & Robinson, K. H. (2004). Why anti-homophobia in teacher education? Perspectives from Australian teacher educators. *Teaching Education*, 15(1), 9-25.

Sears, J. T. (Ed.). (2005). *Youth, education and sexualities: an international encyclopaedia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.