

TEACHERS' REPRESENTATIONS ABOUT GENDER AND DIVERSITIES IN AN OLINE DISCUSSION FORUM

Dánie Marcelo de Jesus

ABSTRACT: In this paper, I discuss an investigation about teachers' representations of different subjects in a discussion forum of a continuing education course in the on-line context about gender and diversity. The aim is to amplify the understanding of how the homoerotic theme is presented in the participants' discourse. The data analyzed is based on the Critical Discourse Analysis and is supported by studies about gender and sexuality. This study was conducted using an interpretative research methodology, and the analysis focused on identifying the discursive representations that emerged in the linguistic choices of the users' course. The results showed that teachers, despite the training course, tended to interpret through a heteronormative hegemonic discourse (BUTLER, 2006) in order to describe an individual with a homosexual identification.

KEYWORDS: representations, discourse, teacher education.

RESUMO: Neste artigo, eu discuto resultados de uma investigação sobre as representações dos professores de diferentes disciplinas em um fórum de discussão de um curso de formação continuada no contexto on-line sobre gênero e diversidade. O objetivo é compreender como a temática homoerótica é apresentada no discurso dos participantes. A análise dos dados foi baseada na Análise Crítica do Discurso, apoiada por estudos sobre gênero e sexualidade. O estudo foi conduzido por uma metodologia de pesquisa interpretativa, e a análise focou na identificação das representações discursivas que se manifestaram nas escolhas linguísticas dos usuários do curso. Os resultados mostraram que os professores, apesar do curso de formação, tenderam a manter um discurso hegemônico heteronormativo (BUTLER, 2006) para descrever um indivíduo com uma identificação homossexual.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: representações, discursos, formação de professores.

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have long shown there is good reason for concern about gender themes and their social and political consequences in our globalized society (LOURO, 2000; MOITA LOPES, 2002; 2003; 2009; 2010; BUTLER, 2006). These studies have taken into consideration how sexuality is accentuated by a hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity that seeks to legitimize social practices in terms of masculinity and femininity. Thus, men tend to be shown as naturally robust and dominant, and women as gentle and delicate. However, this polarization rejects the diverse ramifications of sexual performance. Differing from this position, the latest studies argue that there are individuals who may identify with labels such as gay, transgender, bisexual, lesbian, amongst others, depending on their different social contexts.

According to this view, the purpose of this study is to investigate the representations of teachers of different subjects in a forum in a distance course. In this context, I tried to understand the teachers' discourse about gender and diversities. The work is supported by Critical Discourse Analyses (FAIRCLOUGH, 2000). Theoretically, this approach is characterized by a dialectical view of the relationship between structure and agency, and of the relationship between discourse and other elements of social practices and social events. Moreover, this paper is also followed by studies about gender and sexuality (SEDGWICK, 1990/2008; BUTLER, 2006) which is a field devoted to gendered representation as central categories of analysis.

There is an accepted premise in our society which is based on the perspective that people were born into a defined sexual hierarchical role. However, the recent studies about the multiplicities of feminine and masculine expression may lead to the rethinking and reassessment of the current hegemonic sense of stable identity. This perception understands identity practices as complex historical and social processes in which the involved individuals are being constantly reinterpreted by their interlocutors. It is due to this situation that people are defined as belonging to a social space. This space is almost always constructed to deny differences and reinforce dichotomous thinking that justifies the supremacy of one group over another. One result of this ideology explains why a heterosexual male can affirm that he is not a woman, not a child and not a gay.

These binary poles are revealed through social practices (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001) which are not only symbolic, but relate to how group worlds are perceived. The social practices of discourse contribute to a composition of the "identity" of individuals and their social relationships, representations, and knowledge. From this view, power relationships and ideological standpoints are essential in understanding the social dimensions of sexual identity.

An ideology in this sense should be understood as that which constructs reality through the dimensions of discursive practices and their contribution to the production, reproduction or transformation of domination in relationships (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001). The discursive practices constitute the dimension of language in use which in turn is involved in a process of production, distribution and consumption of texts, which naturally vary according to the types of discourses and social factors involved.

On the basis of this theoretical perspective, I am seeking to understand teachers' discourse with regard to genders, and how they result in discursive conventions which legitimize and reproduce the male and female conditions. These representations generate ideologies that support our perceptions of male and female, and thereby impose ideas and attitudes, frequently imperceptible, with respect to individuals who identify themselves as differing from the social standard.

This same ideology collaborates with the representations of social stereotypes, and is one reason why we constantly hear comments trying to portray those people who are interested in the same sex as being promiscuous, or dangerous to the integrity of family and society. These may be understood, however, as mainstream interpretations of gender identity and practices that are often responsible for the creation of marginalized social spaces, as we can see in the peripheral alternative communities formed by outsiders.

On the other hand, the school as a state institution, can also be seen as an important device for spreading binarism (male and female, heterosexual and homosexual) in mainstream education. Thus, it is not unusual to observe discrimination which reinforces attitudes against gay/lesbian students. In some situations, Brazilian teachers tend to ignore that the school is populated by individuals who differ from the conventional norms. Brazilian schools usually do not even allow a pedagogical practice that might reflect upon these differences and their social and cultural effects.

This paper is based on an interpretative view (ERICKSON, 1986/1990) and assumes that the natural context and the participants clarify what is going on in a social situation. The point of this approach is to reveal the meaning of actions in social life as well as interpreting the interaction between the various members that make up the environment studied.

Seen from this angle, Erickson (1986/1990) considers that the objective of interpretive research is to understand the universe of human language microscopically. The relationship between the micro and macro contexts proceeds dialectically. This approach to research shares the view that the socio-cultural environment of each individual determines our social behavior.

The research was developed in an e-learning course supported by the Brazilian Open University. The aim of this course was to reflect upon genders, sexual orientations, ethnical and racial relations. It required 200 classroom hours, divided into 6 modules in the Moodle space¹ – the presentation of the Moodle platform, 30 hours; diversity, 35 hours; gender inequality, 35 hours; sexuality and sexual orientation, 35 hours; ethnical and racial, 35 hours; and finally the evaluation task, 30 hours.

The analysis focused on a forum entitled “homophobia at school” with 300 participants (state teachers of varying subjects) from January to July in 2011. I read the forum several times in order to understand the teachers’ representations about gender.

Based on the analysis of data collected, I report recurring themes in the teachers’ discourse. I concentrate on the discursive representations that are indexed by participants’ linguistic choices.

In my discussion, I begin by summarizing my theoretical approach. I focus on some concepts that have been developed around gender in the setting of education. I then briefly portray ideas from Critical Discourse Analysis, identity and gender with the aim of presenting my discursive perspective in support of my research. Moreover, I present the analysis. Finally, in the concluding part of this paper, I discuss findings and their implications in teacher education.

¹ Moodle is a free software e-learning platform.

1 GENDER, DISCOURSE AND DIVERSITY AT SCHOOL: CONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE INVESTIGATION

Historically, the school setting has always been an environment which encourages hegemonic standards of behavior to dissimulate the denial of gender differences (LOURO, 2000). Teachers and students often “pretend” that they all live by the same standards of sexual behavior. However, this situation is constantly questioned, and shows that sexual boundaries may not be entirely controlled. The school, in turn, reacts with devices that regulate and discipline students who might disturb the accepted hegemonic behaviors (MOITA LOPES, 2002). Therefore, the common reaction of the school is to promote a discourse that obsessively repeats stereotyped images with the objective of avoiding any action which may deviate from the well-established rules (LOURO, 2000).

Nevertheless, if some students insist on behavior that is considered inappropriate, the school tends to isolate them to avoid any ‘contamination’ of others in daily interactions. In this way, the school tries to prevent any deviants from acquiring sympathy from others. Due to this situation, most gay and lesbian students are silenced and they have to take on certain behavior patterns in order to become more conventionally accepted (LOURO, 2000).

On the other hand, for some reason, when the school mentions the issue of sexuality, it is always seen as a natural phenomenon often within the context of the church, and whose purpose is the marriage between men and women. Thus, in this world, all references to other forms of identification that are not straight, and thereby out of standards, are easily rejected (BUTLER, 2006). Educators, however, ignore that even the hegemonic discourse of masculinity and femininity is not factual, but only historically and socially constructed. It is natural to understand why the figures of the female and male take different forms at certain times and in certain cultures. This issue is better understood when we bear in mind that sexual identities are discursively characterized by discourse. A consequence of this vision is the understanding that human relationships are mediated by constant power struggles that are not always transparent between those involved (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001).

It is through language that we have chosen the way of naming what is around us, highlighting the differences, and creating symbols of unity and collective identification and the voices that were needed to be expressed are thereby erased.

From this point of view, we may understand why hegemonic discourses surrounding the subject of sex seek to clarify the natural boundaries between masculine and feminine. Analyzing this, we realize that heterosexual legitimacy does not occur randomly, but is the result of a game with ideologically constructed hegemonic rules that show us how we should behave and move in our social theater.

2 DATA ANALYSIS

2.1 INVISIBILITY OF HOMOPHOBIA IN THE CLASSROOM

According to Louro (2000), it is frequently observed that teachers reveal profound unwillingness to understand the culture that recognizes the plurality of genders. The school seems to be a place marked by stigmatization and prejudice. Despite this negative description of the school setting, I believe other meanings may be interpreted differently from those we have portrayed until now. The school may also be an environment to question rigid discourse about genders. Thus, the natural attitude between teachers is to deny the existence of different expressions of sexuality, as illustrated in the following examples:

1. Look, honestly, I have never witnessed any cases of homophobia, perhaps the reason is because I work only in a nursery school (28th may, 2011).
2. At the school where I work there haven't been any homophobic situations yet, 'cause there aren't any gay people there, but in another school we faced a situation where a boy aged 11 had a relationship with another boy of the same classroom. There were several comments and homophobia was perceived in the classroom. One of the students has actually dropped out of the school (forum "homophobia at school, Monday, March 21, 2011).
3. Cases of homophobia (hate toward homosexuals), I have never had those situations in my town or schools. But I have actually seen children who demonstrated their homosexuality being the victims of continuous bullying by their classmates, and lesbians too. (Pedagogical Practices in combating homophobia, Saturday, March 26, 2011).

In the above examples, teachers seem not to pay much attention to the fact that there is homophobia at school. They use some intensifiers (*never, honestly, yet, only, not*) which stress the impossibility of homophobia. Where does

this belief come from? This belief is certainly related to hegemonic discourse. When teachers deny homophobia they reveal a symbolical representation of men and women.

We can also see some contradictions. In the second example, the teacher uses the conjunction “but” which shows evidence that there is homophobia. This happens because the student demonstrates some attitudes which reveal his sexuality (*a boy aged 11 had a relationship with another boy of the same classroom*). When students come out of the closet the school tends to kick the student out (*that student has actually dropped out of the school*).

It is interesting to observe that teachers know that psychological and physical violence sometimes occurs, but they usually do nothing about it (*But I have actually seen children who demonstrated their homosexuality being the victims of continuous bullying by their classmates, and lesbians too*), even when the victims are children. Why do schools permit this violence? Because the students must be punished and be ashamed of their homosexual attitudes.

However, we need to take into account that teacher training is based on an educational model which is remarkably fragmented and not responsive to diversity (LOURO, 2000). Consequently, teacher development programs are expressively about ideas which suggest that the objective of training is merely to produce technically competent teachers and provide them with pedagogical knowledge and classroom control. In this sense, Monte Mór (2011) points out the restrictive goals of isolated practices in the school settings aimed to reinforce technical values in which pedagogical efficiency and effectiveness are mediated by a technique-methodology competence.

This technicist thinking, according to Kleiman and Silva (1999), amplifies the fragmentation of the school curriculum. This view reveals that the school seeks to homogenize students and does not take into account the individual differences of learners. Thus, with this paradigm being dominant teachers feel lost in dealing with ‘difference’. Within this framework, teacher education has become dissociated from the issue of ‘othernesses’, and perhaps this is one of the reasons that lead teachers to avoid dealing with the conflicts related to the issues of sexual preference. Due to this, teacher education programs or proposals need to understand the issue of gender as a key-word in re-evaluating the curriculum in schools (MOITA LOPES, 2002; 2003).

The following are further examples of contradictions in teachers' discourses:

4. I've never seen any situation at school, but we noted that some students are very afraid of being gay, they're afraid of being discriminated against by schoolmates because they know that the world is not as open to a discussion on this subject as it should be (forum "homophobia at school, Monday, March 28th, 2011).

This kind of contradiction is natural in teachers' discourses because it reveals that language is not transparent. Our lexical choices demonstrate our social position (FAIRCLOUGH, 2000). As the school almost always adopts a policy of homogenization of behavior, there is little tolerance of homoerotic practices inside the schools (*students are very afraid of being gay, they're afraid of being discriminated against by schoolmates*).

The policy of homogenization seems to develop a neutral education where teachers are seen as carriers of knowledge who know and explain the contents of the curriculum rationally (MONTE MÓR, 2000). However, as Fairclough (2000) points out that apparent neutrality in traditional education is an illusion, revealing, on the other hand, ideological acts where teachers and students are stimulated to reinforce fixed values. Thus, this concept of education does not concern the development of a critical approach which questions the *modus operandi*, and consequently the essentialist view of gender (BUTLER, 2006). In this way, it seems to be natural that teachers have difficulty in managing an education which sees knowledge as relational, negotiated and fluid (MOITA LOPES, 2003)

5. I am not aware of dangerous cases caused by homophobia in my school except for a kind of psychological pressure. The exclusion of homophobic expression is a kind of terror which means people are not being considered as real men in the middle of "normal" people (forum, terror persists - Wednesday, March 16, 2011).

In this excerpt, the teacher is not aware of homophobia in his/her school (*I am not aware of dangerous cases caused by homophobia in my school except for a kind of psychological pressure*) because it means only psychological pressure for him/her. This can also be understood as a consequence of a little debate inside graduate courses, suggesting that more attention needs to be paid

for teachers to construct educational practices which are culturally sensitive (ERICKSON, 1996) to issues of homophobia.

The fact that the teacher does not realize the effect of symbolic violence on students' learning process (JESUS, 2012) demonstrates the necessity of creating programs which attend particular social groups in order to acknowledge our students express gender differently (PAVLENKO, 2004). This difficulty in dealing with non-canonical sexual orientation also reveals that our educational system maintains our educational professional in a position of fragility toward the issue of 'difference'. The teachers receive little or no support or supervision regarding this question, considering that this professional is generally educated with a focus on the transmission of theoretical content (MONTE MÓR, 2011).

In some cases, I have come to realize how physical and symbolic violence could well be seen in the classroom as a way to correct some deviants. Jesus (2012) considers that this type of violence is a way of legitimizing heteronormativism discourse in schools. In his article, he draws attention to the visible difficulties that a minority of boys face when not behaving appropriately.

The strategy usually is to make gender dichotomy visible to reinforce the hegemonic position and legitimize the norms of conventional cultural ideas of gender. Perhaps that explain why teachers seem to establish by their actions the roles for correct student's sexual behavior, teaching good manners etc. This situation inspired Butler (2006) to point out the necessity of deconstructing the norm, not only in terms of gender, but also of sex. Thus, she affirms that gender is not a consequence of sex, but sex is an effect of gender and cultural norms. From this perspective, sex is a cultural phenomenon that governs the materialization of the body; sex is an ideal construct that is forcibly materialized through time (BUTLER, 2006).

3.1.3 HOMOPHOBIA IN THE CLASSROOM

The school, as a result of its social role, is an authority that can evaluate, and orient the position of its subjects in classroom space, defining who and where to stay. Participants incorporate this discourse with such naturalness that they collaborate in maintaining the *status quo*, as can be seen in the following fragments:

6. We had a student who shook up the school four years ago, we had a lot of conflicts with the other boys who did not respect him because he was different from them; such as style of walking , dressing, talking and playing. The boys felt offended by his presence and parents constantly were in school complaining about him. The parents said that the boy was a bad influence on others. The situation became so difficult we needed to go to court and the boy finally dropped out of school when he 'came out of closet' (Forum Respect is the beginning Tuesday, March 22nd, 2011).

Dissatisfaction is clearly evident when the teacher, in quote 6, describes the presence of the student with the verb "shook up" and "conflicts". The students' presence can be intimidating in terms of the idealization of men's role models (*he was different from them; such as style of walking, dressing, talking and playing*). In being different, the student causes insecurity among other children in the school community (*The boys felt offended by his presence and parents constantly were in school complaining about him*). This situation points out how the concept of masculinity is socially constructed and mediated by power (MOITA LOPES, 2003). Why did heterosexual boys feel offended? Why were their parents so afraid?

The fear created by the presence of gay boys in school opens up for questioning the logical structure of masculinity which identifies a monologist perception of the subject (BUTLER, 2006). According to Butler (2006), the effort of including 'difference' constitutes a risk to the heterosexist thinking which supports repetitive standards of gender. This logic advocates that essentialism raises the issue of the universality of being female/male, evoking coherence in the categorization of the normative. Thus, a compulsory expectation of feminine and masculine should emerge in the school setting as a mechanism of educating students in 'acceptable' behavior. Being men/women are categories that are learned and they are not intrinsic in themselves. Thus, the various explanatory models offered of feminine and masculine should be avoided. However, any individual who can break through this mutual agreement must be treated and conducted in a correct way (SEDWICK, 1990/2008).

7. There were situations where female/male students went to the bathroom and everybody left immediately, the people made jokes, they whispered around those students and teased them. These were some of the situations that usually happened at school. Teachers who stared at students in a

discriminatory way (Brazil without Homophobia Program Forum, Saturday, April 16th , 2011).

Who can survive at school when he/she has to live in a social exile (*female/male students went to the bathroom and everybody left immediately, the people made jokes, they whispered around those students and teased them*). She/he is classified, homogenized and monitored by the teachers and other classmates (*Teachers who stared at students in a discriminatory way*).

The teachers usually limit their explanation of homoeroticism with religious and simplistic ideas. As shown in the following example number 08.

8. I understand the sensation of SADNESS that some people feel when they see intimate behaviour between two people of the same sex. For me this attitude of same sex intimacy is not right even if we need affection. Anywhere in the world it would be seen as a scandal. GOD made men and women to love each other and also make families. I think homossexualism can be a disease or maybe it is not. I think it's only a fad (Homophobia Forum, Sunday, April 10, 2011).

In this example, the teacher tries to generalize the common view against gay people (*Anywhere in the world it would be seen as a scandal*). The use of capital letters (SADNESS) is noticeable as a voice regrets when it realizes that there are types of non canonical sexual experiences. The teacher assumes the role of spokesperson in a society which sees gays as absurd. He also uses the biblical discourse (*GOD made men and women to love each other and also make families*). He also affirms that homoerotic behaviour can be seen as an illness. Finally, he tries to associate homoerotic behaviour as an expression of consumer society (*I think it's only a fad*) and he doesn't see gay people as a natural expression of human sexuality.

The view which tends to encourage homophobia at school, as it was observed in my data, is constantly reasserted in the Brazilian classroom. Diniz (2010) carried out a study showing how religious education reinforces prejudice and intolerance against homosexuals. Normally, gays or lesbians are seen as moral deviates or as having a psychological illness. Thus, homosexuality is presented as unnatural and a danger to the perpetuation of humanity.

Religious views also collaborate in constructing teachers' representation about gender as symbolic capital (BORDIEU, 1989/2012), which seeks to create subjectivity and individual consciousness. In turn, religion in a cultural system produces and reproduces values, emphasizing the normative masculinities and femininities. Keeping this in mind, there is still the challenge in teacher education to allow multiple viewpoints in discourse of gender and sexuality.

FINAL REMARKS

In this paper, I have discussed how a group of teachers of different subjects represent the issue of gender in a forum in a distance learning course with the aim of reflecting upon genders, sexual orientations, ethnical and racial relations. The data were generated by observing and analyzing the teachers' comments throughout the course. To support our idea, we used Critical Discourse Analysis and a gender studies' framework. Both theoretical perspectives are particularly interesting for capturing heteronormative norms and conflicts in the teachers' discourse.

In the examples, we can see that the comments attempted to capture the teachers' representations about non conventional sexual expression. In each of these cases, there was identification within the traditional identity of gender. Teachers reported psychological violence that occurred in their school setting. And in some cases they tended to be in alignment with hegemonic views. Regarding this issue, teachers seem not to be very well-prepared to deal with situations related to social diversity.

I would like to stress that there is a need for open discussion about gender as well as teaching/learning processes between teachers in graduate and undergraduate courses. Teachers and future teachers will constantly have to deal with gender conflicts in their classrooms. I would not like to say that it is a simple topic for teacher education. In Brazilian education, teachers, unfortunately, have great difficulty in reflecting upon gender issues. They prefer to ignore that in the classroom the students may have different sexual behavior. Finally, giving a voice to students is probably one of the best ways of attempting to reveal many social stigmas. Simply discussing the topic does not change our system itself. However, a critical reflection can be an important tool in constructing new representations about genders among teachers.

This work indicates the importance of the study of gender for language teacher education. The construction of a new gender agenda can move our educational system to promote reflections and new expectations to promote openness and changes in the hegemonic view of femininity and masculinity. In this sense, an educated critical view seems to be an effective instrument for creating a new experience inside our classroom, which is of great concern for all teacher education.

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