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A Feminist Reframing of Bullying and Harassment: Transforming schools through critical pedagogy

Une reformulation féministe des notions d'intimidation et de harcèlement : transformer les écoles grâce à la pédagogie critique

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Article abstract

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A FEMINIST REFRAMING OF BULLYING AND HARASSMENT: TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS THROUGH CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT. This article aims to reformulate existing understandings of bullying behaviours in secondary schools, by applying a critical feminist lens to patterns of verbal and psychological harassment among students. Through this understanding, educators may better understand the causes of (hetero)sexist, transphobic, and homophobic behaviours. With a more complex awareness of these power relations, teachers, teacher educators, and educational leadership scholars will be offered critical approaches to help them transform the oppressive cultures of schools.

UNE REFORMULATION FÉMINISTE DES NOTIONS D'INTIMIDATION ET DE HARCÈLEMENT : TRANSFORMER LES ÉCOLES GRÂCE À LA PÉDAGOGIE CRITIQUE

RÉSUMÉ. Le présent article vise à reformuler la compréhension des actes d'intimidation dans les écoles secondaires en analysant sous un angle féministe critique les tendances au harcèlement psychologique et verbal chez les élèves. Grâce à cette nouvelle démarche, les éducateurs devraient mieux comprendre les éléments qui sont à l'origine des comportements sexistes, transphobes et homophobes. En étant davantage sensibilisés aux rapports de force qui existent, les enseignants, les éducateurs et les spécialistes en éducation disposeront de démarches critiques qui les aideront à transformer les tendances oppressives des écoles.

The problem of gendered harassment in North American schools is persistent, prevalent, and commonly misunderstood. Many schools have been trying to combat violence and harassing behaviours by implementing blanket bullying policies that do little to address the underlying issues of the school climate and culture that allow these behaviours to persist (Shariff, 2003; Soutter & McKenzie, 2000; Walton, 2004). The long term impact on individuals targeted for harassment is well-documented and severe: lower academic performance, absenteeism, drug and alcohol abuse, and suicidal behaviours have all been linked to schoolyard bullying (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Rigby & Slee, 1999; Sharp, 1995). Students who are targets

of sexual and homophobic harassment have been identified as being at even greater risk for these harmful behaviours and leaving school (California Safe Schools Coalition, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Reis & Saewyc, 1999; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005).

This article reviews research on the negative impact of gendered harassment in North American schools, and provides a critical feminist framework to help educators better understand possible roots of these behaviours. By placing the gendered dimensions of behaviours commonly viewed as bullying at the centre of this analysis, I make explicit how gendered hierarchies get taught and reinforced in schools. Finally, I introduce critical and anti-oppressive pedagogies as philosophical approaches that disrupt and challenge the reproduction of dominant heteronormative gender roles in schools. This transformative and liberatory approach to learning can help educators to read their environments and act consistently and proactively towards student behaviours and school cultures with a view to creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments for all.

WHAT IS GENDERED HARASSMENT?

Gendered harassment is a term used to describe any behaviour that acts to assert the boundaries of traditional gender norms: heterosexual masculinity and femininity. It is related to, but different from, bullying. Bullying is defined as behaviour that repeatedly and over time intentionally inflicts injury on another individual (Olweus, 1993), whereas harassment includes biased behaviours that have a negative impact on the target or the environment (Land, 2003). Forms of gendered harassment include (hetero)sexual harassment, homophobic harassment, and harassment for gender non-conformity (or transphobic harassment). I link these three forms of harassment because the impact of the harassers' behaviour is linked to norm-setting and policing the performance of traditional (heterosexual) gender roles (Larkin, 1994; Martino, 1995; Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003; Renold, 2002; Smith & Smith, 1998; Stein, 1995). Although physical bullying is often the most obvious form addressed in schools, verbal bullying and harassment are also prevalent and often ignored, even though they have been found to be quite damaging to students as well. Hoover and Juul (1993) found in their study on bullying that repeated verbal attacks by peers are as devastating as infrequent cases of physical abuse (p. 27). Most bullying policies and interventions are not designed to get at the more persistent and insidious forms of harassment that occur in schools. Canadian researcher Gerald Walton observes that bullying and zero-tolerance policies, "do not consider the cultural and societal antecedents of violence in schools. Neither do these programs consider *psychological* violence" (2004, p. 29). While I do not wish to ignore the painful experiences that victims of physical harassment and violence endure, this article will address the emotional violence caused by

the more insidious and often ignored issue of gendered harassment that is verbal and psychological in nature

Understanding the scope of the problem

I began investigating this problem as a result of my experience as a high school teacher in the U.S. observing the hostile climate that existed for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (glbt) students in my school. During my first year of teaching, I observed a very bright and athletic student – a leader in the school – dissolve into depression, drug use, and absenteeism as a result of how her friends were treating her. She had fallen in love with a young woman she had met that summer, and her classmates made sure she felt their disapproval. In addition to being excluded from her peer group, she was verbally harassed on a regular basis. This change in her school experience was enough to send a previously strong and confident young woman into a downward spiral of self-doubt and dangerous behaviour. As a young teacher who wanted to support this student, I felt frustrated and angry by what the other teachers allowed to happen in their presence at the school.

As I investigated this problem further, I learned that although glbt youth are commonly targeted for harassment, they are not the only ones suffering from the homophobic and heterosexist climate of schools. Any student whose behaviour is perceived as different in some way can be isolated and harassed using anti-gay insults (O'Conor, 1995; Renold, 2002; Rofes, 1995; Smith & Smith, 1998), and any student who wishes to assert and defend his/her place in the heteronormative social order of the school must engage in heterosexualised discourse that includes various forms of gendered harassment (Duncan, 1999; Martino & Berrill, 2003; Renold, 2003).

Students who are harassed in their schools have been found to be more likely to skip school, abuse drugs and alcohol, and have a higher rate of suicidal ideation (Bagley, Bolitho, & Bertrand, 1997; Irving & Parker-Jenkins, 1995; Rigby & Slee, 1999; Sharp, 1995; Slee, 1995). Most of these students perceive school as a dangerous place, and that causes significant damage to their level of engagement in the school community. One group of students that is regularly targeted in schools is glbt youth (California Safe Schools Coalition, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Reis, 1999; Reis & Saewyc, 1999).

In a national phone survey of U.S. youth, the National Mental Health Association (2002) found that 50% of respondents reported that students who were gay would be bullied most or all of the time. In another U.S. survey, 91% of glbt students reported hearing homophobic remarks in school frequently or often (GLSEN, 2001). What is disturbing about this trend is not only its prevalence, but the lack of effective intervention to stop this problem. In the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) 2001 School Climate Survey, 83% of glbt youth said that their teachers rarely

or never intervene when hearing homophobic remarks (GLSEN, 2001). In a more recent study in California, students were asked how often they heard biased remarks (sex, sexual orientation, gender expression, religion, race, disability), and how often teachers intervened. The two forms of verbal harassment which students reported hearing the most were based on sexual orientation and gender presentation. These were also the two forms that students reported teachers were least likely to interrupt (California Safe Schools Coalition, 2004).

These studies indicate that educators are not adequately intervening in these forms of harassment. This inaction on the part of educators teaches students that the institution of the school – and by extension, society as a whole – condones such activity. By teaching students that gendered harassment is tolerated, schools effectively support the discriminatory attitudes that cause it in the first place. As democratic institutions in a diverse and changing society, schools must teach about the causes of such harmful attitudes and work to reduce the impact of them on their students. In so doing, we will more effectively work to reduce prejudice and violence in schools. I will now address each of these forms of harassment in-depth to understand them more fully: homophobic harassment, harassment for gender non-conformity (or transphobic harassment), and (hetero)sexual harassment.

Homophobic harassment

Homophobic harassment is any behaviour, covert or overt, that reinforces negative attitudes towards gay, lesbian, and bisexual people. The most common form of this harassment is verbal in nature and includes the use of anti-gay language as an insult (e.g., "that's so gay" "don't be such a fag"), anti-gay jokes, and behaviours that intend to make fun of gays and lesbians (such as affecting the speech and walk of a stereotypically effeminate gay man to get a laugh). The prevalence of this discourse in schools allows homophobic attitudes to develop and grow as students learn that this language is tacitly condoned by educators who fail to intervene when it is used. As George Smith (1998) explains in his article, *The Ideology of "FAG,"*

> The local practices of the ideology of "fag" are never penalized or publicly condemned. Explicitly homophobic ridicule in sports contexts goes unremarked. Effective toleration of the ideology of "fag" among students and teachers condemns gay students to the isolation of "passing" or ostracism and sometimes to a life of hell in school. (p. 332)

The isolation and vulnerability experienced by these students is exacerbated by the refusal of teachers and administrators to intervene on their behalf. Many students' experiences support Smith's assertion. In the Human Rights Watch (Bochenek & Brown, 2001) study, *Hatred in the Hallways*, several students spoke of similar experiences:

> Nothing was done by the administration. A guy screamed "queer" down the hall in front of the principal's office, but nothing happened to him. The teachers – yeah, the teachers could have seen what was going on. Nothing happened. (p. 39)

> One day in the parking lot outside his school, six students surrounded [Dylan]. One threw a lasso around his neck, saying, "Let's tie the faggot to the back of the truck." He escaped from his tormentors and ran inside the school. Finding one of the vice-principals, he tried to tell her what had just happened to him. "I was still hysterical," he said, "I was trying to explain, but I was stumbling over my words. She laughed." The school took no action to discipline Dylan's harassers. Instead, school officials told him not to discuss his sexual orientation with other students. After the lasso incident, the harassment and violence intensified. "I was living in the disciplinary office because other harassment was going on. Everyone knew," he said. "It gave permission for a whole new level of physical stuff to occur." (p. 1)

These stories are not exceptional. In GLSEN's National School Climate Survey (2001), 84% of glbt youth report being verbally harassed in school and 64.3% report feeling unsafe. These students are also targets for school graffiti, vandalism, and ostracism that often leave them at high risk for depression, dropping out, and suicide (California Safe Schools Coalition, 2004; GLSEN, 2001; Reis & Saewyc, 1999). On a more positive note, these students report less harassment and increased feelings of school safety when a teacher intervenes sometimes or often to stop name-calling (California Safe Schools Coalition, 2004).

Students who are perceived to be gender non-conforming are also frequently targeted in schools. Harassment for behaviour that transcends narrow gender norms is one often lumped together with homophobic harassment, but it is important to investigate each separately so as not to further confuse existing misconceptions of gender identity and expression with sexual orientation.

HARASSMENT FOR GENDER NON-CONFORMITY OR TRANSPHOBIC HARASSMENT

Harassment for gender non-conforming behaviours is under researched, but important to understand. According to the California Safe Schools study, 27% of all students (n=230,000) report being harassed for gender non-conformity (2004). Due to prevalent stereotypes of gay men and lesbian women who transgress traditional gender norms, people whose behaviour challenges popular notions of masculinity and femininity are often perceived to be gay themselves. This is a dangerous assumption to make, as it mistakenly conflates the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity. Many adults also engage in this flawed logic due to their misunderstanding of gender and sexual orientation. However sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation are each distinct and may be expressed in a variety of ways.[1] For

example, although many biological females *(sex)* identify as heterosexual *(sexual orientation)* women *(gender identity)*, that does not mean that is the only possible combination of orientations and identities. By allowing students to engage in this way of thinking and behaving, schools reinforce traditional notions of heterosexual masculinity and femininity that effectively reduce educational opportunities for all students.

Research has demonstrated that more rigid adherence to traditional sex roles correlates with more negative attitudes and violent behaviours towards homosexuals (Bufkin, 1999; Whitley, 2001). When boys disengage from the arts and girls avoid appearing too athletic, it is often the result of teasing and "harmless" jokes. The threat of being perceived as a "sissy" or a "tomboy" and the resulting homophobic backlash does limit the ways in which students participate in school life. Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) describe an interview with a student who was harassed for his interest in art:

> On his way to school one morning a group of boys at the back of the bus from one of the local high schools started calling him names. Initially, he was targeted as an "art boy" because he was carrying an art file. But the harassment escalated and they began calling him "fag boy." (p. 52)

Unfortunately, our society's tendency to devalue qualities associated with femininity make this gender performance much harder on nonconforming boys than on nonconforming girls. Schools tend to place a higher value on strength, competitiveness, aggressiveness, and being tough: qualities generally viewed to be masculine. Whereas being creative, caring, good at school, and quiet are often considered to be feminine qualities and are viewed by many as signs of weakness – particularly in boys. In their study on masculinities in Australian schools, Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) found that "many boys said that while they were able to perform the techniques of literacy ('I can read'), performing an 'appropriate' masculinity often prevented or deterred them from displaying their literacy abilities ('I can't read')" (p. 246). They also discuss how this plays out in physical education: "physically demanding activities such as dance and gymnastics, where both men and women excel, are not as esteemed as those sports which serve to provide an arena for the expression of traditional forms of hegemonic masculinity" (Lingard and Douglas, 1999, cited in Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2003, p. 254). It is not surprising, then, that bullying studies report that "typical victims are described as physically weak, and they tended to be timid, anxious, sensitive and shy. … In contrast, bullies were physically strong, aggressive, and impulsive, and had a strong need to dominate others" (Hoover & Juul, 1993, p. 26).

It is difficult to effectively intervene to stop bullying when the qualities that bullies embody are the ones that are most valued by many and demonstrate a power that is esteemed in a patriarchal society. Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995), the embodiment of the dominant, tough, competitive,

athletic male, is the standard of behaviour in schools and any variation tends to be punished by the peer group (Robinson, 2005; Stoudt, 2006). Though many researchers understand bullying as anti-social behavior, the fact that bullies usually hold social power and get what they want out of such activity shows that they have learned to assert their strength in ways that benefit them. As Walton argues, understanding bullying as anti-social behaviour, "is a misconceptualization because it affords dominance and social status and is often rewarded and supported by other children. It may not be nice, but it is, nevertheless, very social" (2004, p. 33).

The social constructs of ideal masculinity and femininity are at the core of much bullying behaviour. As a result of this, students report that schools are safer for gender non-conforming girls (California Safe Schools Coalition, 2004). The pressure on boys to conform to traditional notions of masculinity is great and the risk of being perceived as gay is an effective threat in policing the boundaries of acceptable behavior. One male student described its impact on his life,

> When I was in elementary school, I did a lot of ballet. I was at the National Ballet School one summer. And that sort of stigma (laugh) which I never thought was a stigma, or could be a stigma, but which became a stigma, followed me into high school. And that was followed with comments continually – "fag," you know, "fag." I think that was actually … one of the reasons why I eventually gave up ballet was just because of the constant harassment, and also pursuing other interests. But I think that was at the back of my mind a lot of the time with the harassment, and realizing that they're right. That's what I was. I knew that that's what I was. (Smith, 1998, p. 322)

When students are limited from developing their strengths because of the climate of the school, then the educational system has failed.

In order to assert their heterosexual masculinity, many boys engage in overt forms of heterosexualised behaviours, as this is seen as the best way to avoid being called gay. One gay student gave the following example:

> You know when all the guys would be making girl jokes, you'd have to go along with them, as much as you tried not to, you still had to chuckle here and there to not raise suspicion. … very frequently, jokingly, some students would say to other students – when they didn't necessarily conform to all the jokes and the way of thinking of women students – they'd say, "what, you're not gay, are you?" (Smith, 1998, p. 324)

The student feels obliged to participate in the (hetero)sexual harassment of his female peers in order to protect himself from being the target of homophobic harassment. The pressure to participate in these oppressive practices works in multiple ways to assert the power of hegemonic masculinity: it engages additional participants in the sexual harassment of females and labels those who choose not to participate as gay. This pressure to conform to ideals of

hegemonic masculinity is at the core of most gendered harassment. This example leads us to the third area of gendered harassment: (hetero)sexual harassment.

(Hetero)sexual harassment

Sexual harassment in schools has been the subject of research and public discourse since the early 1990's (Corbett, Gentry, & Pearson, 1993; Larkin, 1994; Louis Harris & Associates, 1993; Stein, 1992). In spite of this, it is still prevalent. Verbal harassment is the most common form of sexual harassment reported by students, and female students experience more frequent and more severe forms of sexual harassment than males (Lee, Croninger, Linn, & Chen, 1996). Terms such as *bitch, baby, chick*, and *fucking broad*, are commonly used in schools by male students as ways to assert masculinity by degrading female peers (Larkin, 1994, p. 268). Another common way for males to perform their masculinity is to engage in heterosexual discourse by sexually objectifying female peers and discussing sexual acts they would like to engage in or have already engaged in (Duncan, 1999; Eder, 1997; Larkin, 1994; Stein, 2002). This is often done near the female students, but is not always directed at them, thus creating a space where women are targeted and objectified with no outlet for response or complaint of tangible harm. This activity creates a hostile climate for most students (Stein, 1995; Wood, 1987) is generally not stopped by teachers, and sometimes is encouraged by their tacit participation. Students reported that male teachers might, "laugh along with the guys" (Larkin, 1994, p. 270) or support the comments and even blame the victim, as demonstrated in the following incident:

> I took a photography class, and the majority of the class was boys. … One day I was in the room alone and one of the boys came in. When I went to leave he grabbed me and threw me down and grabbed my breast. I felt I was helpless but I punched him and he ran out. The teacher (who was a man) came in and yelled at me. When I tried to explain why I had hit him the teacher told me I deserved it because I wore short skirts. I was sent to the principal and I had to serve detention. I didn't want to tell the principal because I feared he would do the same and tell me it was my fault. I felt so alone. Everyday I had to go to class and face it. No girl should have to be uncomfortable because of what she wears or how she acts. (Stein, 1995, p. 4)

Teachers can exacerbate situations by reinforcing the behavior of the offending students. In this case, not only did the teacher not intervene in the sexual harassment, but he added to it by commenting on her attire and stating that she "deserved it." With teachers role modeling and reinforcing such behaviours, it is clear that a new approach to preventing sexual harassment in schools is needed.

Although sexual harassment, by definition, is sexual in nature, I have included it as a form of gendered harassment due to its roots: the public

performance of traditional heterosexual gender roles. In its most commonly understood form, sexual harassment is that of a male towards a female and ranges from comments, gestures, leers or "invitations" of a sexual nature to physical touching, grabbing, rubbing, and violent assault such as rape. I will continue to focus here on the more subtle and insidious behaviours, where the harassers assert their gender role through acts of domination and humiliation, since physically violent and intrusive acts are ones that get a response from school authorities regardless of motive or context.

Although females are most commonly targeted, it is important to acknowledge that men can also be victims of sexual harassment, much of it from other men and usually homophobic in nature. Young women may also be implicated in such behaviours, and it is most commonly exhibited as verbal insults directed towards other females as a result of competition for boyfriends or friendship groups (Duncan, 2004).

Sexual harassment has been described as the way patriarchy works: men continuing to assert their power over women. Though this is a useful place to begin, it is important to stretch our understanding of this problem to include how valorized forms of traditionally masculine behaviours are allowed to be practiced and performed over the devalued forms of traditional notions of femininity. These gender roles are constructed within a heterosexual matrix (Butler, 1990) that only allows for a single dominant form of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1978/1993). As long as these attitudes and behaviours continue to go unchallenged, schools will continue to be sites where youths are harassed out of an education. In order to prevent this from continuing, we must learn effective strategies for intervention that will help educators create schools where such discriminatory behaviours will be replaced by more inclusive and radical notions of respect, equality, and understanding. The next section will explore potential strategies for educators to employ to transform the behaviours and qualities are endorsed and valued in schools.

Why critical and anti-oppressive pedagogy?

In this seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire outlined the framework for what has become the field of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/1993). This book has influenced the work of scholars and educators who seek to transform learning while making explicit the dominant power structures that influence how knowledge is produced. Freire's work focused on the process of consciousness-raising with people who had been marginalized in order to empower them and create more positive educational experiences and social outcomes. Applying this approach to learning can help reduce gendered harassment and create safer school environments for all students by making explicit gendered hierarchies in schools and exploring multiple ways of undoing the heterosexist patriarchal structures that allow them to persist. Teacher education and school leadership programs that are infused with criti-

cal and anti-oppressive pedagogy can provide the knowledge and the tools necessary to help teachers and administrators reduce these behaviours.

While physical acts of violence are difficult for schools to ignore, the daily acts of psychological violence that persist teach lasting lessons that impact students' lives in ways that many teachers and administrators fail to acknowledge. In order to change this second order curriculum (Kincheloe, 2005), the entire culture of the school must shift. In order for this shift to be successful, all stakeholders in the community must be involved in the process, including students, families, and teachers. The onus is on administrators and school boards to create the conditions for this level of community engagement to occur. Even though, "all students can be silenced to some extent by top-down, memory-based classroom arrangements," Kincheloe argues that, "marginalized students… [often experience] anger, depression, and anxiety" as a result of these practices (p. 24). As a result, a critical pedagogy must be applied in our schools to change the types of lessons students are internalizing.

An anti-oppressive approach to education informed by critical pedagogy is one that is central to confronting and transforming these power dynamics in schools, and the best way to help schools embrace such an approach is to start with teacher education and leadership programs. We must better prepare educators to critically examine the power structures of the school and the community so that they may act as role models and provide their students with the language and the tools to confront the inequalities (re) produced within that system.

The concept of anti-oppressive teacher education grounded in critical pedagogy requires that educators be taught about privilege and oppression and how these factors influence the kind of education different students receive. In his book, *Troubling Education: Queer activism and antioppressive pedagogy*, Kevin Kumashiro explores four different conceptions of anti-oppressive education: education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and othering, and education that changes students and society (Kumashiro, 2002). Here I will advocate for the fourth conception as the best approach to preparing educators to change gendered harassment in schools. This approach assumes that oppression is "produced by discourse, and in particular, is produced when certain discourses (especially ways of thinking that privilege certain identities and marginalize others) are cited over and over. Such citational processes serve to reproduce these hierarchies and their harmful effects in society" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 50). By helping teachers and administrators understand how systems of oppression are perpetuated by language and behaviour in schools, we can work more effectively to transform our understandings of the dominant gender stereotypes students mobilize to hurt their peers.

An anti-oppressive pedagogy is not limited to understanding how jokes and teasing hurt students. It also challenges the banking style of education, in which students are viewed as empty vessels for teachers to fill with information that supports dominant power structures (Freire, 1970/1993). Kumashiro explains that many disciplines perpetuate oppressive knowledges, by presenting only the dominant culture's point of view in a history textbook, or by teaching science as purely objective and never questioning how it has been used to validate only certain ways of understanding the world. By excluding the experiences and cultural contributions of women, non-Western thinkers, glbt people, and racialized peoples, educators teach that power and knowledge is only valid when it comes from the white, western, heterosexual, male perspective. Kumashiro asserts: "we need to acknowledge that the desire to continue teaching the disciplines as they have traditionally been taught is a desire to maintain the privilege of certain identities, worldviews, and social relations" (p. 58). When fully enacted, anti-oppressive pedagogies can help students learn in new and exciting ways and create a school culture that allows room for multiple gender identities and expressions and sexual orientations.

A critical transformation of school culture can start by ending name-calling and related forms of verbal harassment. The simplest step that teachers can take is to make a public and consistent stand against any kind of name-calling and related verbal harassment. This shows students that they can expect to be treated fairly and no hurtful or discriminatory language is acceptable. An example of an approach that a critical educator can take is to "stop and educate" in situations where oppressive language has been used. In addition to setting the standards for acceptable language in the classroom, it is important for educators to provide information about why certain names are especially hurtful due to their biased meanings. If students only learn that it is punishable to call someone "gay" or a "dyke," then they may internalize the message that being gay or gender nonconforming is something shameful or bad. Helping students learn to interrogate daily discourses, to explore the historical specificity of certain terminologies, and to understand how language is used to control identities and behaviours will offer them a different way of seeing the world.

Teacher education programs can help new teachers reflect on their educational experiences and what perspectives they bring into their classrooms. Kincheloe defines critical teacher education as one that "problematizes knowledge" and that can offer students the space to challenge, debate, and analyze assumptions and normative knowledges (2005, p. 102). It can also offer future teachers effective tools by using innovative curricular materials, discussing concepts such as hegemony and patriarchy, and providing interactive class activities that allow students to practice critiquing normative classroom practices and ideas. For example, student teachers have told me

that they are afraid that they will get in trouble for talking about gay issues in class. Providing student teachers a safe environment in which to practice these discussions and experience a model of a critical classroom is important so that they can experience this form of learning and develop confidence in their abilities to teach from a standpoint that can often cause discomfort and disrupt familiar knowledges.

Educational leadership programs and coursework must also model critical, anti-oppressive approaches to school leadership. Programs should consider how these philosophies influence a principal's approach to leadership. A principal's philosophy is a powerful influence on the culture of the school: what accomplishments get celebrated, what learning is rewarded, whose knowledge is valued, and who advances professionally (Dinham, Cairney, Craigie, & Wilson, 1995; Riehl, 2000; Ryan, 2003). These are the strategies that school leaders use to communicate to teachers, staff, and students which behaviours and achievements are to be emulated and which are to be avoided. School administrators need to create an environment where anti-oppressive educators are supported and teachers are encouraged to recognize and value alternative knowledges and diverse student accomplishments.

CONCLUSION

My experiences as a classroom teacher are what led me to pursue a deeper understanding of this phenomenon in schools. The frustration I felt at the inaction of my colleagues led me to study the factors that influence how teachers understand and respond to gendered harassment in schools. The findings from my dissertation research on this subject have focused my attention on teacher education and school leadership programs and the potential for critical and anti-oppressive pedagogies to transform what knowledges and worldviews are taught (Meyer, 2007a; Meyer, 2007 in press).

Students who are targets for gendered harassment tend to suffer silently and internalize the harmful messages embedded in the insults and jokes that permeate many school cultures. The focus on bullying and physical aggression has brought into perspective some important concerns, but has also obscured others. By using vague terms such as bullying and name calling, scholars and educators avoid examining the underlying power dynamics that such behaviours build and reinforce. When policies and interventions don't name and explore systems of power and privilege, they effectively reinforce the status quo. Educators must understand that when insults and jokes are used to marginalize groups, the damage goes beyond the harm to individual students. These discourses normalize the hegemony of white, male, heterosexual, middle-class, able-bodied values and leave many students feeling hurt, excluded, and limited in their chances for educational success (Meyer, 2007b).

It is essential for teachers to learn to examine critically the impacts of gendered harassment in schools and to develop tools to work against it. By enacting a critical anti-oppressive pedagogy in teacher education and school leadership programs, we can better equip professionals to transform such oppressive discourses in schools. Until the hegemonic masculine values that privilege power, individual strength, and competition are challenged, most interventions will be temporary band-aid solutions and the negative cycles of violence and oppression will continue. By examining bullying and harassment together, and explicitly addressing the underlying homophobia, transphobia, and (hetero)sexism, we will be able to create more systemic approaches to addressing violence in schools and help educators understand how to change the culture of their schools by transforming sexist, transphobic, and homophobic practices, policies, procedures, and curricula.

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NOTE

1. See Butler (1990, 2004) for a more in-depth explanation of these concepts and their differences.

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