Texts, Structure, and Collaboration:

Reflections of a Professional Development

Addressing Homophobia in Secondary Schools

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Abstract:

Homophobia is an incredible problem within educational settings. Therefore, we must begin examining how we can address the challenge in an effective manner. Researchers postulate professional development (PD) discussing homophobia is an appropriate method to address the problem. To date, there is little published literature that discusses how a PD exploring homophobia should be structured. Therefore, this article attempts to provide some insights for possible PD constructions.

Biography:

Joseph R. Jones, PhD is a former high school English teacher and is known nationally for his research addressing homophobia and bullying in educational environments. He has coined two terms in his academic community, contextual oppositions and unnormalizing education. He has been interviewed extensively by media outlets about homophobia and bullying in schools, and has published copiously on the topic. In November of 2010, his book, *Making Safe Places Unsafe: A Discussion of Homophobia with Teachers* was released. *Bullying in Schools: A Professional Development for Educators*, was released in the Fall of 2012. In 2014, *Unnormalizing Education: Addressing Homophobia in Higher Education and K-12 Schools* was published. *Under The Bleachers: Teachers' Reflections of What They Didn't Learn In College* was published in 2015. He has also published numerous peer-reviewed articles and book chapters discussing bullying and homophobia in K-12 and higher education. In addition to his publications, he has presented approximately 70 presentations at peer reviewed conferences exploring the topics of homophobia and bullying. More recently, he has co-constructed a K-12 anti-bullying program with an academic colleague that has been implemented in school districts. In 2014, he was awarded a prestigious national award from Auburn University and the National Anti-Bullying Summit for his scholarship and service in attempting to create safe schools for all students. He currently teaches at Mercer University.

Texts, Structure, and Collaboration: Reflections of a Professional Development Addressing

Homophobia in Secondary Schools

The problem of homophobia is still rampant in schools. The most recent national data from the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Educational Network (GLSEN) reveal:

- 84.9% of students heard 'gay' used in a negative way frequently or often at school

- 91.4% reported that they felt distressed because of this language

- 71.3% heard other homophobic remarks frequently or often.

- 56.9% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff.

- 81.9% were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) in the past year because of their sexual orientation.

- 38.3% were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year because of their sexual orientation.

In addition to the statistical data, there are countless personal stories of students enduring harassment because of their perceived sexuality (Jones, 2010, 2014). In fact, "Matt spent most of his high school years hiding in the library reading and doing his homework. He spent almost every day with a fear embedded in his stomach that someone was going to call him gay or tease him because he was not the most masculine male in his school" (Jones, 2010, p.2). Indeed, homophobia needs to be addressed within educational settings.

Researchers hypothesize that professional development (PD) programs have the potential to combat homophobia in the schools (Armstrong, 1994; Crocco, 2001; Jones, 2010). Some

scholars believe that professional development programs should instruct teachers about how to intervene when hearing homophobic remarks (Armstrong, 1994; Kissen, 1991; Underwood, 1998). Along these lines, Lipkin (1995) proposes that teachers should be taught how to broach the subject of homosexuality and sexual diversity in their schools. Other researchers suggest that professional development should focus on instructing teachers about specific texts that could be used in their classrooms and specific pedagogical practices for discussing homosexuality (e.g., Marinoble, 1998).

There are two types of professional development: independent and group (Darling-Hammond, 1995). In independent professional development (which does not involve an administratively required formal structure), teachers learn by reading professional journals, engaging in discussions with other educators, and by implementing action research projects. Conversely, in the group model, participants address a shared challenge together through inquiry, discussion, and reflection. Darling-Hammond (1995) argues that collaborative professional development is one of the most effective forms of professional development because it provides space for different perspectives to be heard on how to address challenges in schools. Collaborative inquiry can provide teachers with powerful learning experiences by fostering dialogue among groups of teachers who want to address key challenges (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995). Collaborative models of professional development may help to develop ongoing dialogues that allow participants to engage in discussions over an extended time (Marshall & Snow, 2002).

According to Glasgow (2002), teachers need formal instruction on how to address homophobia in their classrooms. However, to date, there is little research literature exploring professional development examining homophobia. In this article, I discuss my perceptions

concerning structuring an effective PD for teachers addressing homophobia in schools. I developed these perceptions from a PD program that I developed for a research study examining secondary teachers' perceptions of homophobia in their schools. Before discussing my reflections, I will first briefly discuss the methodology of my research study.

My study used a qualitative approach to studying and addressing the problem of homophobia and heteronormativity in secondary schools. It examined how eight secondary school teachers explored homophobia in discussions about their classrooms and schools through a collaborative professional development program. The eight participants came from diverse backgrounds, had different educational levels, and represented a range of years of teaching. Their content areas were English, music, history, art history, and physics. Participants' ages ranged from 34 to 53 years old.

In the study, I facilitated nine PD sessions over six months on a weekday evening that was convenient for the research participants. I chose nine sessions because Darling-Hammond (1995) suggests that the most effective PD allows teachers to meet regularly throughout an academic year to discuss a challenge in an ongoing manner. I chose a six month time period because I wanted to incorporate Darling-Hammond's belief in establishing regular meetings with teachers. The PD program took place at a centrally located site for all participants and was held in a room that provided privacy. An informal arrangement was used with the participants seated at tables in a U-shaped pattern, which fostered an atmosphere that aligns with the collaborative and reflective philosophies of professional development, one that I characterize as a "community of learners" (Rogoff, 1990). By "community of learners," I mean a setting that validated each teacher's ideas and thoughts about homophobia as being important in our discussions. A community of learners allows each person to contribute his or her knowledge to a discussion. By

doing so, the community uses all contributions to construct new knowledge about the topic. The professional development sessions in my study lasted approximately one hour per session.

Additionally, the project drew on the knowledge and expertise of all participants. It entailed collaboration between the participants and researcher because I allowed the participants a voice in choosing the topics that were discussed during the sessions. At the end of Session 1, I asked participants individually to list the topics related to homophobia that they would like to discuss as a group. I used the lists to develop Sessions 2 to 5 and to choose the readings for these sessions. I was unable to cover all of the topics that the participants submitted. Some of the topics that the participants chose were: how does homophobia impact New York State schools, homophobia in schools across the nation, and how do students react to homophobia. Participating teachers were also asked to bring curriculum topics and texts from their academic disciplines which became the focus of Sessions 6 through 8. With the exception of Sessions 1 and 9, the sessions followed this plan: a journal writing activity (10 minutes.), a collaborative discussion of the texts (40 minutes), and an ending journal writing activity (10 minutes).

In terms of the schools, three of the county high schools have received national recognition as being some of the best high schools in the country. Further, a majority of the suburban area schools have received high recommendations by Great Schools, an organization that ranks schools across the country. In contrast, several schools in the urban school district are performing below state standards. Table 1 depicts some of the facts about the area school districts in which participants in my study work.

Table 1: Facts about the Area School Districts (gender was not listed).

	District A	District B	District C	District D	District E	District F
Population	26,450	33,000	45,000	57,256	28,542	26,587
Annual Budget	$60547645	$75359785	$68248953	$112489358	$55489752	$465897410
Median Years of Experience for Teachers	11	10	10	11	10	12
Number of Professional Staff	349	569	629	3900	453	429
Student/Teacher Ratio	11	12	12	17	13	14
Average Teacher Salary	$58,238	$60,423	$47,632	$45,239	$43,589	$52,148
Racial Demographics in Percentages	Asian 11% Black 9% Other 2% White 78%	Asian 7% Black 12% Other 5% White 76%	Asian 7% Black 9% Other 3% White 82%	Asian 3% Black 64% Other 22% White 11%	Asian 2% Black 24% Other 6% White 68%	Asian 5% Black 15% Other 6% White 74%

As mentioned above, the study involved eight secondary school teachers from schools in New York. Participant and school names have been changed for confidentiality. Eight participants volunteered for the study and were selected through a process of convenience, that is, through relationships with me and other study participants. Although only eight volunteered, the number was a large enough number to explore the research questions and small enough to build a community of learners.

The group included a mixture of suburban and urban teachers who varied along the lines of sex, age and race. Table 2 depicts the demographics of the study participants.

Table 2 Demographics of Study Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Race (self-identified)	Highest Educational Degree	Years Of Teaching	Content Area
Beth	37	Female	Caucasian	Master's	11	History
Betty	53	Female	African American	Master's	15	Art
Brian	38	Male	African American	Master's	11	Music
Kirk	48	Male	Caucasian	Master's	22	Physics
Matt	38	Male	Caucasian	Master's	14	English
Michelle	47	Female	Caucasian	PhD	22	Art
Sally	35	Female	Caucasian	Master's	12	Music
Sue	54	Female	Caucasian	EdD	20+	English

The demographics of the participants and their districts mirror the national demographics discussed earlier. As with the national demographics, the salaries of teachers (average for the district) are near the national average salary of Americans. Also, the schools' racial make-up is similar to the national racial make-up (with the exception of District D). The racial make-up for the participants in this study is close to the national data (roughly 75% of both populations were Caucasian, and 25% were African-American).

Texts

One of the attributes of an effective professional develop involves the ability for teachers to make personal connections to the texts that are used in the PD (Darling-Hammond, 1995). In choosing the texts for this PD, I aimed to create a collaborative atmosphere by choosing texts based on the participants' choices of topics. To that end, I chose texts that would engage

teachers in discussions of homophobia from both academic and practical aspects. In my study, the following texts were used: Lawrence King Shooting Video, "California Middle School Student Murdered in School Because of His Sexual Orientation" (GLSEN, 2008), Documentary on Gay High School Athletes, "Inside New York Schools" (GLSEN, 2008), "GLSEN National Report" (GLSEN, 2008), "GLSEN National Report Summary" (GLSEN, 2008), Etymology of the Words "fag" and "faggot", O'Conner's (1995) "Who Gets Called Queer In School: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Teenagers, Homophobia and High School."

In using these texts, I believe that a majority of the teachers engaged with the practical texts, but did not engage with the academic texts. In doing so, these teachers were more concerned with non-academic information that discussed homophobia than published academic research, which supports Darling-Hammond's (1995) claims about which texts should be used in professional development programs. She argues that when teachers can connect to a text they are more apt to engage reflectively with it; thus, creating a more effective PD program. Moreover, it is also interesting that despite all of the participants having a Master's degree and two completing doctorates, the teachers were not engaged with the academic text that was used.

Further in exploring texts, I asked the teachers to bring texts (lesson plans, or other artifacts from their classrooms) to discuss during the remaining sessions. As a group, we explored how the texts could become catalysts to help teachers address homophobia in their classrooms and schools. The texts ranged from exploring how to discuss homophobia in Williams' *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to discussing the biographical information of musical composers. I believe this was an effective way to engage teachers and allow them to make connections to the texts involved in the professional development. In fact, on teacher talked about how excited she was about possibly using GLBT themed art and photographs as writing

prompts, and the potential the reflective writing process could have on homophobia in her classroom and school. Her excitement was a result of her connection to the photographs and her desire to address homophobia. Her connections to the art provided an avenue for constructing an effective professional development session. Moreover, Darling-Hammond (1995) postulates that texts should focus on a community's commitment to change which may involve specific teacher's pedagogical practices.

When creating an effective professional development, I postulate the texts are one of the most important things to consider. Teachers must be able to connect to the texts and be able to connect the texts to their daily classroom practices. That being said, it is also important to consider the structure of the PD.

PD Structure

After examining the texts of the PD sessions, I believe it is necessary to discuss the structure of the PD in my research study. Although I originally thought that nine sessions would be appropriate, I found that this length of time may have been overwhelming for some of the teachers involved. Several times during the study, teachers were tardy and they told the group how long the day had been for them. That being said, the sessions took place during a weeknight, which the participants chose prior to beginning the PD. However, many of the teachers were exhausted from working all day. In one session, only four teachers arrived on time because of job related incidents.

In discussing the reality of teachers' schedules, it is important to mention my implementation of an on-line dialogue group that I created for the program. In the beginning of the PD program, I informed the group that I had created an on-line discussion group. In hopes of continuing our discussions, they were instructed to use the group as a discussion mechanism. I

reminded them of the discussion board at the end of each session. However, no one posted anything on the discussion board. Because I told the participants that I would not read the discussion until after the PD program had ended, I was not aware that it was not being utilized. I posit teachers did not engage in the on-line dialogue because of their busy lives.

In constructing a PD, it is important to truly conceptualize the structure of the program. Often, we forget how hectic and chaotic K-12 teaching can truly be. Thus, we must recognize how teachers' busy lives will impact the professional learning that takes place. In fact, it is possible the hectic nature of teaching my negatively impact any professional learning. Thus, the structure must always be considered.

Collaboration

As Darling-Hammond (1995) argues, collaboration is a vitally important aspect of effective professional development. The data from this study suggest that this professional development was truly collaborative. The teachers were all engaged in a majority of the discussions with powerful comments concerning the texts, especially the documentary examining gay athletes. I believe the collaboration existed because of the structure of the PD. Prior to beginning each session, I arranged the room in a U-shaped pattern, which allows for the construction of a community of learners approach. I believe the structure of the room became the conduit that provided the space for effective collaboration to take place. Also, in choosing the texts, I was specifically constructing a collaborative atmosphere. The teachers were asked to bring texts from their own disciplines; thus, constructing the PD became a collaborative process.

Considerations

In order for professional development to be effective, the creator must cognitively examine all of the choices that entail constructing a PD. I believe this is even more important

when constructing a PD that discusses sensitive topics such as sexuality. In my study, I had to navigate the individual belief systems of eight secondary teachers who volunteered for the research study. This can be incredibly problematic when one is constructing a PD for a large number of faculty and staff members in a school or school district who may not want to attend the sessions. Therefore, it is imperative to choose appropriate texts to which teachers can connect and find practical applications to their own pedagogy and classrooms. Thus, it may be more beneficial to avoid overtly theoretical texts. That being said, it may be more effective if the participants had a larger role in choosing texts because that would allow the participants to believe they have some power in the PD development, especially because they are engaging in conversations surrounding a sensitive topic.

Moreover, the structure of a PD discussing sexuality should also be examined carefully. It was obvious in my study that the day of the PD plays a tremendous role in how effective the PD is and can be. As such, one should truly consider the impact of having a PD at the end of a traditional school day. Also, teachers may not realize how hectic their own professional lives are when making choices concerning the PD structure. Perhaps, a PD during the summer would be more appropriate for a specific school or school district. Is it feasible to have a PD on a Saturday morning if teachers are paid stipends? I posit all of these possibilities should be explored when attempting to construct a PD. A non-traditional approach may be the most effective method of constructing professional learning.

Finally, when constructing a PD that examines homophobia in schools, it is also imperative to closely examine the role collaboration plays in the learning process. The PD must be as collaborative as possible. Thus, it is important to consider how the room structure can hinder or help build collaborative learning moments. When exploring homophobia in educational

settings, it is important to have a safe dialogic space for all participants to share their own thoughts about the topic. Participants should not feel as though they are powerless in this process, and providing them with an avenue to engage in those difficult conversations releases some of the power of the facilitator and gives it to the participants. Also, one should consider how technology can be used effectively to continue the collaborative nature beyond the arranged meeting time. I believe the discussion board that I had arranged could have become a powerful tool to enhance further learning. Thus, we must devise ways to incorporate technology into the PD and allow the technology to further engender collaboration.

Conclusion

Homophobic bullying is a tremendous problem in our schools. Matt's story mentioned in the opening paragraphs is just one of the numerous realities for many non-heterosexual students. Schools are supposed to be safe schools for all students, yet for many non-heterosexual identities schools are places of intolerance, hatred, and abuse. As educators, we must begin grappling with how we can create safe learning environments for this population. It must be done because all students deserve a safe place to learn and to grow. Professional development can be a viable tool to begin examining how homophobia impacts learning environments and how we can erase homophobia from our classrooms and schools.

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