Dismantling the Context and Breaking Free From Contextual Oppositions: How Teacher Education Programs Can Combat Homophobia

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In exploring homophobia in schools, the author discusses a qualitative research study conducted with a group of teachers from New York State. The article examines how the group of teachers (participating in professional development program) discusses their perceptions of homophobia in their classrooms and schools. Specifically, the teachers discuss how certain language uses and behaviors (although homophobic) may be appropriate within their classrooms and schools because of their constructed contextual oppositions. These oppositions dictate how they perceive and define homophobia in their schools. The study offers several implications for teacher education programs to consider when addressing homophobia in schools.

As a former high school English teacher, I daily attempted to address homophobia in my school and classroom. Conversely, in schools across the United States, faculty or staff intervened in only 3.4 % of the harassment of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) students. According to the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN), 36.5 % of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender students reported skipping school at least once within the previous month because they felt unsafe in school (GLSEN, 2003). Moreover, the problem of homophobia in schools is more rampant than most people realize. In February 2008, a middle school student was shot and killed in California because he was believed to be gay (GLSEN, 2008). Evidently, the student, Larry, asked one of his classmates if he would be his valentine. The next day, Larry's classmate brought a gun to school and killed Larry.

Attached to this notion of distress, the media has reported that several students have committed suicide within the last year in the US as a result of homophobic bullying. One student hanged himself in July; his parents were told that he was constantly bullied in schools because of his sexual orientation (Crary, 2010). It is evident homophobia is a problem in classrooms and schools.

In attempting to address homophobia, the researcher designed and conducted a professional development program with teachers. The study explored the following questions: What are secondary teachers' perceptions of homophobia in secondary classrooms? , and how do teachers participating in professional development programs about homophobia grapple with the issues that arise?

Methods/Participants

The study used a qualitative approach to studying and addressing the problem of homophobia and heteronormativity in secondary schools. It examined how a group of secondary school teachers explored homophobia through discussions about their classrooms and schools through a collaborative professional development (PD) program. The participants volunteered for the study, and came from diverse backgrounds, had different educational levels, and represented a range of years of teaching. All of the teachers had earned graduate degrees (required for tenure), while three were completing their doctorates. Their content areas were English, music, history, art history, and physics. Participants' ages ranged from 34 to 53 years old. The PD consisted of nine sessions taking place over a six month period on a university campus, which the researcher facilitated. In order for triangulation to occur, data were collected through the following methods: unstructured focus group interviews, unstructured individual interviews, audio taped PD sessions, participant reflective journals, researcher field notes, and a research journal. Data were analyzed through a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006).

Further, in framing this study and for transferability purposes, it is important to conceptualize the schools in which these participants worked. Three of the county high schools have received national recognition as being some of the best high schools in the country (US News and World Report, 2009). A majority of the suburban area schools have received high recommendations by Great Schools, an organization that ranks schools across the country (Great Schools, 2010). In contrast, several schools in the urban school district are performing below state standards (New York State Department of Education, 2009). Table 1 depicts some of the facts about the area school districts in which participants are employed.

Although the study revealed a number of findings concerning how teachers perceive homophobia, for the purpose of this discussion, this article will focus on the teachers' perceptions of language and behaviors in their schools and classrooms, and how those perceptions may impact how heterosexism and homophobia is addressed in their schools. Moreover, the article explores how these findings may impact teacher preparation programs' role in combating homophobia.

Findings/Discussion

When examining how these teachers perceived homophobia in their schools and classrooms, the topics of language and behaviors surfaced in the discussions. It is important to mention how these participants discussed the use of language and behaviors because the teachers' conceptualizations directly influence how they perceive and address homophobia in their schools and classrooms.

"Fag", "Gay" and "Queer"

When asked to discuss examples of homophobia most participants mentioned the use of "fag" but proposed that this word has other meanings, non-related to sexuality. For example, they believed that some students may call someone else a "fag" and not be referring to his or her sexuality, but rather are making a statement similar to "You're an idiot" or "you're stupid." Thus, most participants acknowledged that they did not address students' use of "fag," when used in their classrooms.

Likewise, most teachers reported that they did not address the use of the word 'gay' because of the uncertainty about its meaning. For example, most teachers stated that they hear the phrase "that's so gay" (which, to them means "that's dumb") quite often in their classrooms and hallways and never reprimand the students. For the participants, these phrases have become

pop culture phrases that have meanings that are antithetical of the words traditional meanings.

For example, in discussing "that's so gay," one teacher stated, "I hear that all the time, and a majority of the time, the student is only saying it to mean 'that's dumb' or something like that. He or she is usually not referring to someone's sexuality." In this statement, she has conceptualized a meaning for "gay" that is rarely linked to homophobic language. In doing so, she has contextualized the use of "gay" to have meanings other than a homophobic slur. All of the participants agreed with her constructional definition.

Likewise, through the discussions with the teachers, many of the teachers believe that the word "fag" has changed over time and that using the word is not a definitive homophobic act. For example, one teacher stated,

> you hear 'fag' from kids, but they are not usually talking about someone who is gay. They are just using it as a derogatory term. The word has changed over the years. They only recognize it as a way to 'be mean' to another person. (PD session #3).

Another teacher also stated, "fag has become so neutral" (PD session #3). Additionally, someone else stated in PD session #3,

> when most students call someone gay or 'fag', they are usually saying 'you're an idiot' or 'you're stupid'. They are rarely referring to someone's sexuality. The word has become a way for kids to just be mean.

Another teacher responded, "I agree."

Conversely, when participants hear the word "queer," there is a definite perception of homophobia. A teacher stated, "queer was

something that we used in the eighties, then it had a very different meaning. We used it to mean different or strange. Now, the kids use it as a homosexual slur" (PD session #3). Further, one teacher expressed her concern about the use of queer, "my son plays on an athletic team, and at practice, I have heard the coach and other players say, 'stop playing like a queer'" (PD session #3).

For these participants, the definition of "queer" has evolved from meaning different to becoming a derogatory term for non-heterosexual identities. In this regard, the use of "queer" becomes an exhibition of power for the coach and other players on the athletic team. It becomes a way to separate the athletic performance of the players. "Stop playing like a queer" reinforces the stereotype that "queers," are not athletic or that the player is not participating in the game at the appropriate "masculine" level.

In exploring the use of language in these participants' schools, it is important to consider how their community defines homophobic language. Because of their perception of a contextual use within language, they are able to label a word as homophobic or not homophobic based on its usage. For example, the participants can label the use of "fag" as not being a homophobic statement in all situations because they believe that it has a contextual meaning, which differs with each student's usage. Likewise, for these participants the use of "gay" and "that's so gay" are also seen as non-homophobic in most situations because of its contextual and popular cultural use within their students' lives. The participants are reporting the meanings of these words and recognizing a contextuality among the uses of the words. In other words, for these teachers, 'gay' and 'fag' do not have a fixed homophobic definition. In doing so, the context determines whether the student is engaging in homophobia or not.

In determining what language is homophobic, these teachers have constructed a contextual

opposition concerning the use of homophobic language. For the purpose of this discussion, I define contextual opposition as the process of placing words/actions into oppositional relationships through the use of contextual understandings. In other words, context can change the process through which one constructs meaning about words. In doing so, context changes the traditional meaning of a word to a meaning that is opposite of the word's traditional definition (Jones, 2011).

In order to fully understand how contextual oppositions function within our society, I would like to offer a non-sexuality related example. Several months ago, I was having dinner in Philadelphia with several friends. As we were sitting in the restaurant, an African American male walked over to a nearby table and stated, "What's up N. (He used the racist slur)." From my vantage point, I was able to view everyone involved in the conversation. My friend sitting opposite to me, with her back to the individuals, only heard the statement. She was appalled. She quickly turned around to view the exchange. When she noticed that the conversation was between two African American males, she returned to her previous placement and continued eating. It was evident that her anger had subsided, and I inquired why she was no longer upset. She responded, "it is different in that situation."

In that moment, contextual oppositions dictated her understanding, her identifying and her acceptance of racist language. For her, it was an appropriate use of racist language; she had contextualized the use of racist language. At first, she was upset about hearing the word because of an assumption of the context in which it was spoken. After realizing the context, she was willing to accept the use of the word. In that moment for her, the N word was not a racist slur. She had contextualized the use of hate language into a structure which I call "contextual oppositions." The meaning of the word did not change, but by contextualizing the word, she

ascribed a non-racist definition to the word. I argue that contextual oppositions function in the same manner with teachers' identification and discussion of homophobic language and behaviors.

For example, for these teachers, the word "fag" has many different modern meanings within their students' socialized constructions of language (depending on the contextual use), yet rarely including a derogatory slur for non-heterosexual identities. Thus, teachers are more willing to accept the use of "fag" in the school because "fag" has become a neutral word. Specifically, the word acquires new meanings based on its contextual uses. In other words, for these teachers, it is acceptable to call a student "a fag" because there is a level of uncertainty in the meaning and use of the word. Unless the student using the word becomes physically violent with the one he or she is calling a "fag," it is difficult to label the use of the word as homophobic. In doing so, the context controls how the teachers define homophobic actions within their schools.

Further, by being able to place the words within contextual oppositions, participants imply that the word is an acceptable use of hate language. This contextual use of language, for these participants, influences their perceptions of homophobia in their classrooms and schools. They may hear a student call someone a "fag" and will not address the use of the word as a homophobic remark, because of their construction of a contextual opposition. In doing so, their perception of the existence of homophobia is lessened.

As with "fag", these teachers construct oppositions through the use of "that's so gay" and "gay." For these teachers, "that's so gay" and "gay" do not always translate into homophobic language in all circumstances. As cited above, some of the teachers believe that "that's so gay" means "that's stupid" or another non-homophobic phrase. Therefore, like with "fag," these

participants are accepting of this use of language in their classrooms.

Similarly, their understandings of "queer" were also constructed through contextual oppositions. In the past, "queer" was not solely a homophobic slur, but had multiple socialized meanings. Whereas, presently, they believe that "queer" is directed as a derogatory comment toward/about non-heterosexual identities. For one participant, the word was a way to demean male student athletes who are not playing the sport at an appropriate masculine level. For the teachers in this study, contextual oppositions determine their definitional frameworks concerning homophobic language.

Behaviors

Not only do these teachers construct contextual oppositions with language use, but they also use the same process to discuss homophobic behaviors. In discussing homophobia, one teacher recalls the following story:

> I was watching a group of students preparing for a skit that they had written for an assignment in my class. There were two boys and three girls in the group. The group was "re-enacting" an SNL type program. In performing the skit in front of the class, one of the male characters, spoke in a lisp, hands dropped at wrists, and other stereotypical attributes of gay men. (PD session #3).

The teacher continues to discuss his belief that the re-enactment of a Saturday Night Live (SNL) skit was not a homophobic act because it was created for comedic purposes. The other participants agreed with him. One teacher stated, "I don't believe that the kids' performance was homophobic. It was a satire. It is SNL" (PD session #3). For these teachers, this depiction was not a homophobic act because of its contextuality. For them, the skit was premised within the

parameters of a popular culture television show that is known for comedy and satirical re-enactments. Thus, the contextuality of the students' skit determined whether the teachers labeled the behavior/action as homophobic.

In discussing why this skit was not homophobic, one teacher made the following statement, "the same thing applies to racism. If you hear a white comedian talking about racial stereotypes in a funny way, one where everyone is laughing, most people would not call him a racist." All of the participants agreed with this statement. Thus, these participants' statements suggest that the context of the skit determines whether it is homophobic or not.

However, in a different PD meeting, a participant discussed how his class was winding down and a group of students began laughing and getting out of hand. One male student stood, dropped his wrists (in a stereotypical gay manner), and walked down the aisle shaking his hips back and forth saying 'look at me, I am a little faggot' (PD session #4). According to the teacher, "there was a self-identified gay student who is out and a little flamboyant in the class." In his discussion, the teacher identifies the behaviors of the male student as homophobic. In his description and commentary, the teacher labeled the student's action as homophobic. Therefore, the context in which the student behaved directly impacted the teachers' recognition and labeling of homophobic behavior.

Moreover, in his reflective journal, another participant writes after PD session #4, "I saw a student in class walk over to another student that I assume is gay. He has not told me that he is a gay. But, I think he is. The first kid drops his wrist and speaks in a very high pitched voice to kid sitting down. That's my chair. Your chair is in the back by your boyfriend." For him, this was a homophobic act.

In discussing these examples and others from the professional development, it is important to note the difference in the teachers' identification of homophobic behaviors. The teachers did not label the first incident as homophobic because of the context of the behavior. The skit was framed around SNL, a comedic popular culture television show. Conversely, the other behaviors were labeled as homophobic behaviors because of their contexts. Thus, as with language, these participants have constructed contextual oppositions in their definitions and perceptions of homophobia. In doing so, they are allowing the contextual underpinnings to dictate whether they label a behavior as homophobic.

Implications/Conclusion

This study suggests that participants defined, discussed, and labeled homophobia through the contextual use of language and behaviors. In doing so, participants discussed issues surrounding homophobia by constructing contextual oppositions. Therefore, these contextual oppositions became the process through which they developed their definitions and understandings about homophobia in their school communities.

As a result, these oppositions influence how these participants interpret language and behaviors and label those as homophobic or non-homophobic. This is problematic because allowing teachers to continue to define homophobia in terms of contextual oppositions, allows teachers the opportunity to not view all hate language and behaviors as inappropriate. In doing so, teachers affirm some hate language/behaviors and reject other hate language/behaviors based on social constructions and contextuality. Therefore, this may hinder how schools address homophobia. Specifically, if certain language and behaviors are not "deemed" homophobic in all circumstances, then it creates an atmosphere of uncertainty. With this uncertainty, it may become more difficult to

reprimand students for homophobia. Teachers may become more apprehensive in addressing homophobia; thus causing homophobia to continue to thrive in schools.

Further, by not addressing all hate language/behaviors equally, it suggests a level of socially covert heterocentricity. By allowing these phrases and behaviors to exist in classrooms and schools, teachers are, knowingly or unknowingly, perpetuating and engaging in heteronormativity. Thus, they are inadvertently engaging in homophobic practices. By allowing these phrases/behaviors to be repeated, and in many cases deemed as acceptable, these teachers are allowing homophobia to continue, without being labeled as overtly homophobic. Therefore, these teachers are inadvertently perpetuating homophobia and heterosexism through their constructions of contextual oppositions.

Another implication of the study suggests that the teachers' perceptions of homophobia in schools may be under-reported. These contextual oppositions determine their perceptions of homophobia in their schools and classrooms. If these teachers are determining what language and behaviors are truly homophobic based on contextual oppositions, then the problem of homophobia may be more widespread than initially believed.

Additionally, it is important to explore how contextual oppositions impact other forms of hate language. Specifically, one teacher compared the SNL skit with racial comments in a comedic performance. For that teacher (and the ones who agreed) the racist comments should not be labeled as racist slurs because of their contexts. Therefore, if teachers are labeling the use of other hate language through contextual oppositions, it may be necessary to examine the extent to which contextual oppositions impact all forms of hate language, not just homophobic language.

Finally, with the necessity to begin addressing homophobia in schools and classrooms, one implication from this study offers insight into how teacher education programs can train teachers to address homophobia. Specifically, teacher educators can begin exploring how their programs can be used as catalysts to engage teacher candidates in critical conversations concerning how the candidates construct meanings about homophobia and homophobic language. It is through these critical conversations that teacher candidates can understand the power that language has in schools. For some, the phrase, "that's so gay" or "fag" may not be harmful because of how it is used and by whom, but it is harmful if one happens to be GLBT. Moreover, although some "re-enactments" may appear to be harmless and "funny" to some, it can still be detrimental to a GLBT student. Thus, critical conversations become avenues to help teacher candidates understand that contextual oppositions engender an idea that hate language and behaviors are only hateful when used in a specific context. Thus, one of the roles of teacher preparation programs should be to begin to break the constructions of contextual oppositions, so that all hate language and behaviors, regardless of their contextual use, are not tolerated in our schools and classrooms.

Conclusion

One of the purposes of this study was to examine how secondary teachers perceive homophobia in their classrooms and schools. As the data analysis revealed, contextual oppositions are the framework through which these participants constructed their beliefs about the existence of homophobia and homophobic acts in their schools. In doing so, teachers define hate language through contexts, rather than addressing and reprimanding all forms of hate language regardless of how it is used and by whom. Therefore, in order to begin combating homophobia and heterocentricity, teachers should begin dismantling their contextual oppositions to create an equal and non-oppositional framework through which to view homophobia.

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About the Author

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Tables

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
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%