

Chapter 13

Uncomfortable Territory: Coming to Terms With LGBTQ+ Rights

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the historical and cultural emergence of the categories of LGBTQ+ identities and seeks to understand why knowing this background matters for the work of designing inclusive policies and welcoming school spaces: focusing on the normative system that produces and polices sexual and gender “deviance” is a crucial part of understanding what we are trying to change. The chapter will also provide an overview of the approaches to gender creative children in order to illustrate why affirming someone’s gender entails engaging with the assumptions behind the concept of gender itself. It will argue that expanding the possibilities of gender identification additionally positively impacts not only queer students, but all of us. It provides readers the chance to think about how deeply their own gender runs through their assumptions and to understand what is at stake for this culture when we ask to include LGBTQ+ identities in school curricula and policies.

INTRODUCTION

LGBTQ+ identities and experiences historically have been absent from most curricula, and education policy has not taken seriously the need to create inclusive environments, at best, or protect queer and gender diverse students from bullying and harassment, at least. The cost to these students’ ability to function at, and stay in, school, has been devastating (Kosciw, Greytak, Zongrone, Clark, & Truong, 2017). Times are changing. Organizations which aim to address both appropriate lesson content and school culture have been doing wonderful work for a number of years now. For example, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Foundation’s Welcoming Schools program (<http://www.welcomingschools.org>) and, in the San Francisco Bay Area where the author is based, the organization Gender Spectrum, provide advice and method for creating school cultures that are safer for LGBTQ+ students. They offer curriculum planning, anti-bullying initiatives, professional development, school climate engagement,

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and safety plans. Gender Spectrum also provides a comprehensive “Schools in Transition” guide to help facilitate transgender and non-binary students’ gender transitions at school. The work to incorporate LGBTQ+ identities in K-12 curriculum and policy is underway, in the face of constant, corrosive undermining in the current political context.

But without a conceptual frame for why gender and sexuality oppression shows up the way it does in every aspect of our society, teachers and other school personnel may be left to their own devices when it comes to providing more in-depth answers to children, parents, colleagues, or for themselves, as they continue to do their important work. Understanding why gender and sexuality are paired under the same umbrella, when a component of working for cultural change in our schools is knowing that they are not the same thing, is a part of the answer, and one that teachers need to know in order to address the questions they will come across as they do this work. Good suggestions for helpful content are priceless resources. At the same time, teachers may need more tools than a vocabulary list, appropriate books, safety plans, and a commitment to gender justice, especially considering the dominance of binary gender in our culture and the heteronormativity it encodes as the “normal” option for human sexuality.¹

Teachers and administrators also need a deeper understanding of the way normative gender has functioned to make the meanings they, as LGBTQ+ allies, are helping to deconstruct. As Mayo (2019, p.xii). writes, “Too often educators have not learned enough about gender identity complexities..., especially if they... have learned from institutions that may only give them a... guest lecture or a few book chapters to help them understand.” Part of understanding the complexity of gender identity, and its relation to (assumptions about) sexual orientation, is understanding why the dominant culture presents gender as simple and obvious, and as linked to sexuality. Because heteronormative binary gender has structured our culture’s thinking about what is “normal” for so long, asking schools to really accommodate LGBTQ+ identities is asking them to fundamentally alter some of their foundational ways of thinking about what is “natural”: uncomfortable territory, indeed.² A more in-depth overview of, in Foucaultian terms, the genealogy of gender, can usefully inform our work, as it brings into focus why LGBTQ+ identities are experienced as different, which sheds light on the category of the “norm,” against which “other” and putatively “more complex” gender identities are formed.

The emergence of LGBTQ+ identities should not be separated from the genealogy of normative gender and heterosexuality, since they were in part created by dominant discourses of what is “normal” and what is “perverse” by comparison. Understanding the why of gender oppression, exploring the systems of thought which underlie the behaviors we are working to change in our schools, is also an important resource to teachers, administrators, and education academics. After all, we all have gender and sexuality, and a well-meaning approach which wants to assign these realms to minority students runs serious risks of re-inscribing the marginalization it is hoping to combat. Exploring the normative work of binary gender – the ways that the assumption that male and female exist as the only options for gender, and the ways their definitions rely on each other create ideas of what is and should be “normal” and “natural” – also adds reasons to do the work of gender justice, by illustrating how we can all benefit from making new spaces in gender norms.

This chapter offers readers an overview of the history of the construction of LGBTQ+ identities in Western culture, in order to show how and why gender and sexuality were initially seen to be the same when these minority identities began to emerge. This helps readers to understand how gender has worked in our culture, and how normative gender has informed both homophobia and transphobia, in order to have a context for the development of non-normative identities and in order to be able to understand what is at stake for all of us when we commit to gender justice.

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