

Pending curriculum: sexual diversity education in teaching training

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Summary

This article shows part of the results from a mixed research that attempted to describe prospective and in-service teachers' perception and attitudes towards LGBTI students and their inclusion in the classrooms. In order to achieve this, the author applied both a survey (as quantitative instrument) and a semi-structured interview (as qualitative counterpart) to 57 English pedagogy students and 4 professors from the same major belonging to Universidad Central de Chile. This paper, however, deals with some of the results from the qualitative focus exclusively, where future teachers and their tutor professors expressed the need of having accurate and formal education about human sexuality and LGBTI issues in general, with the aim of improving their future practices and relationship with their students, as well as their concerns regarding the lack of both academic and practical preparation that helps them face the increased levels of violence at schools, especially when directed to the LGBTI students. It is of great importance that these aspects of education are considered as part of the curriculum of teaching training for the benefit of future students and teachers themselves.

Key words: LGBTI, inclusion, sexual education, prospective teachers, in-service teachers

Resumen

Este artículo muestra parte de los resultados de un estudio mixto que se propuso describir la percepción y actitudes de futuros profesores y sus profesores formadores hacia alumnos LGBTI y su inclusión en las salas de clase. Con el objeto de lograrlo, la autora aplicó una encuesta (como instrumento cuantitativo) y una entrevista semiestructurada (como contraparte cualitativa) a 57 alumnos de pedagogía en inglés y 4 profesores formadores de la misma carrera perteneciente a la Universidad Central de Chile. Este artículo, sin embargo, trata algunos de los resultados arrojados en el enfoque cualitativo exclusivamente, donde los futuros profesores y sus tutores expresaron la necesidad de tener educación formal y precisa en cuanto a sexualidad humana y tópicos LGBTI en general, con el propósito de mejorar sus prácticas y relación con sus estudiantes, además de manifestar sus preocupaciones en cuanto a la falta de preparación académica y práctica que les ayude a enfrentar los elevados niveles de violencia en las escuelas, especialmente dirigida a los alumnos LGBTI. Es de gran importancia que estos aspectos de la educación sean consideradas como parte del currículo de la formación docente para el beneficio tanto de los futuros alumnos como profesores en sí.

Palabras clave: LGBTI, inclusión, educación sexual, estudiantes de pedagogía, profesores en formación

Introduction

Nowadays, one of the biggest problems in-service teachers face at work (especially when recently graduated) is the appalling difference between the theory of teaching and the practice of it. Teachers not only deal with the demands of academic instruction, but also adopt many other

formative roles, which are not considered part of their educational background, but rather personality traits or vocation. Among these qualities, teachers are required to have good interpersonal skills, self-motivation and ability to motivate others, empathy, love and respect for their students and a long list of other desirable characteristics that are not teachable as a subject itself.

Handling violence and teacher-student relationship in general are sides of education that are not covered –as far as this author could investigate – by any Chilean university delivering teaching training. Even though universities provide lectures on psychology and promote inclusion of diversity, these issues are covered from a cognitive and developmental perspective only. Consequently, teachers are left to fend for themselves on those matters, having common sense and certain regulations from the schools –if there are any- as tools of action.

This paper has a primary aim: to give an account of how introducing sexual education and LGBTI diversity issues in the curriculum of teaching training could actually help teachers on their daily practice, especially on their relationship with students, thus enabling them to promote a safer environment at schools.

The violent shocking numbers

According to some organizations, such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and Global Movement for Children (GMFC), the violence originated by different sexual orientation –or suspicion of it- is the most common at schools. This kind of violence is called homophobic and transphobic bullying, because it is based on sexual orientation or alleged gender identity and it affects not only homosexual, bisexual or transgender students, but all the ones who do not abide the prevailing gender norm. (UNESCO, 2015; GMFC, 2011).

Regarding the impact that homophobic bullying has in students' academic lives, Reis (1999) was able to characterize its consequences through a study where he investigated a group of people from the LGBT community (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) from kindergarten to twelfth grade. He detected that 66% of them had difficulty to pay attention in class; 75% avoided certain areas at school; 33% had the worst grades; 17% changed to a different school and the same percentage definitely abandoned school. In the same way, research has consistently shown that concerning other aspects of life, bullying leaves long-lasting negative consequences on the people

who suffer it, such as eating disorders, alcohol and drug abuse, self-inflicted injuries and suicidal behavior, among others (APA, 2011). As it is possible to see, the effects of bullying transcend the mere fact of mockery or rumors, to become a source of constant affliction for the victim and an obstacle to develop successfully in life; what is more, the consequences of bullying are suffered not only during childhood or adolescence, but also in adulthood (Cantor, 2009).

In Chile, the school conditions for LGBTI students are not better, unfortunately. According to Movimiento de Integración y Liberación Homosexual (Movilh), 40% of students related bullying to a diverse sexual orientation, especially if the person was openly homosexual or perceived as homosexual. Additionally, the same study revealed that 55% of teachers knew at least one student who had been discriminated against their sexual orientation at school (Movilh, 2008).

Calling names and insulting are a very common practice at schools; so much so, that students have started to consider it part of the school culture and have accepted it as such (Espinoza, 2016). In relation to this, Cáceres et al. reported that at least 90% of Chilean students have frequently heard names or offenses based on gender ridicule or homophobic expressions at school. Similarly, more than 50% of them recognized having used those expressions at any time. Cáceres et al. showed that more than 75% of people had witnessed violent acts between their classmates while being a student, and between 40% and 45% of the interviewees themselves had participated in these acts of violence as perpetrators or bystanders (Cáceres et al., 2011). It is extremely relevant to become aware of the risk behind assuming violence as part of the normal interaction between people; when violence becomes natural and legit, people distort the limits and disregard the consequences these aggressions have on a student's personal and social development (UNESCO, 2015).

Teaching training in Chile

As a well-known and obvious fact, teachers are a vital component in school dynamics and so is the training they receive as part of their teaching competencies. All the Chilean academic institutions that offer teaching training operate under the regulation of basic standards provided by the Ministry of Education. These organizations manage four levels (nursery, elementary, secondary and special education) and offer different majors. It will be understood by major as the set of plans and programs of study that allows to acquire the competencies to obtain a professional or technical degree (Ávalos, 2001).

The curricular contents and their organization vary depending on the university; nevertheless, according to Ávalos (2001) they base their curricula on four areas: (i) general formation, where social, historical and philosophical aspects of education are studied; (ii) specialty, which deals with specific contents of the field (mathematics, science, etc.); (iii) professional, where aspects of teaching process are covered (curricular organization, evaluation, psychological development of the students, among others) and (iv) teaching practice, which involves preparatory activities leading to teaching itself.

As it is shown, these curricular contents are designed to assess the future teachers' performance according to what they must know and what they can do to practice their functions efficiently. With reference to LGBTI studies, and as far as the author of this research could investigate, there are no Chilean universities that educate their prospective teachers on LGBTI matters as part of their general formation or professional base. Some universities teach subjects related to diversity- focused on terms of learning or cognitive difficulties only, even ethnic diversity, but never sexual. Despite the importance of these curricular components, they suffer from a major drawback: they fail to address sexual orientation as part of the school cultural context, an issue that teachers are certain to encounter at any time during their practice.

Ignorance on LGBTI issues may lead to spreading misconceptions that contribute to demonize this sexual minority community; a relevant fact when it comes to teachers, since they are considered a valid source of knowledge (Espinoza, 2016). According to a study carried out in the Metropolitan region, 12% of students reported that teachers always made discriminatory remarks against students; furthermore, 39% informed they knew about a case of discrimination against an LGBTI student where the perpetrator was a teacher or a member of the school administrative staff (Movilh, 2008). It is clear that an aggression is not always physical or verbal; it can also have subtle manifestations, such as denying students to participate in certain activities; allowing derogatory or malicious comments; promoting negative stereotypes; discouraging students to express themselves, among many others (Generalo, 2005). The violence and/or harassment suffered by students at school –whoever the perpetrator- interferes with their right to a complete and safe education, and it is the duty of teachers and school members in general to provide and safeguard the conditions for it.

Objectives of the study

The question that guided the qualitative aspect of the investigation was: how do some pedagogy students and their professors perceive the inclusion of LGBTI people in the classrooms? As the main objective involved the view of sexuality and its diversity, and the question itself had many perspectives to consider, it was necessary to set sub-objectives that specified an answer. Given the nature of this paper, the perspective that answers the initial question is represented on the sub-objective of describing and analyzing the perceptions of prospective teachers and their professors regarding the academic formation received as part of their teaching training regarding sexuality and LGBTI subjects.

Method

The research had a mixed focus, given that both foci contribute to answer different research questions about a specific problem. One of the advantages the mixed focus has is that it allows a more accurate perspective of the phenomenon. The researcher's perception is more integral, complete and holistic (Todd, Nerlich & McKeown, 2004). However, as this paper will specifically center on the qualitative aspect of the study, it is relevant to remember that from this perspective the gathering of data has no numerical measure and proceeds case-by-case, analyzing data to reach some conclusions, until the researcher achieves a general outlook and is able to generate a theoretical perspective (Hernández, Fernández & Baptista, 2006).

Regarding the design of the study, from the qualitative perspective, this investigation had an interpretive and descriptive approach. This methodology centers on context. In this case interpretive researchers should emphasize empathetic understanding, which comes from observing and listening to the people studied, thus gaining access to their experiences and perceptions (Hernández et al., 2006)

Participants

The primary selected subjects of study were students who were on either third or fourth year of English pedagogy at Universidad Central de Chile, this in order to obtain a greater variety of answers and to ensure a more mature and less idealized perspective of their future work. The actual sample corresponded to 57 students. In the same way, the secondary subjects of study were professors from the same institution and major. This sample corresponded to 4 professors. In this

case, these secondary subjects of study acted as collaborator subjects as well. Similarly, the application of both instruments were carried out at the facilities of Universidad Central.

Instruments

Taking into consideration the characteristics of this study, the selected instruments to gather information were a survey and a semi-structured interview, both designed by the researcher. Regarding the quantitative technique, the survey consisted on a set of assertions measured with a Likert scale. It is worth noting that there were two different surveys: one of them applicable for students and the other one for professors. Thus, the content of the statements varied depending on the case. However, the format of both instruments was quite similar.

Concerning the qualitative instrument, this was designed as a semi-structured interview. This type of interview does not have all the questions predefined, so the interviewer has the opportunity of introducing new questions in order to deepen the participant's answer or obtain greater information (Hernández et al., 2006). The main objective of using this instrument was giving the participants the chance to develop their thoughts at a deeper level, in a more relaxed and sincere way, thus producing richer data.

Both instruments were submitted to scientific rigor, associated to the compliance of essential trustworthiness of the investigation. In order to ensure these standards, the researcher considered five criteria: validity, veracity, applicability, confirmability and transferability.

Data processing

After finishing the fieldwork, it was necessary to start with the analysis of the gathered information. Due to the fact that the volume of it was considerable, it had to be organized and reduced to more manageable dimensions in order to be decoded. During this process, the data was separated according to its meaning and characteristics, labeling the most important information as main categories and the secondary information as subcategories. The main categories were perception, knowledge and attitude; at the same time, each one of them was divided in subcategories previously defined. After that, the author elaborated categorization matrixes, which allowed organizing and decoding the information, becoming a useful tool when establishing connections among categories. All the gathered information was complemented with the

theoretical framework, incorporating textual assertions and answers obtained from the semi-structured interviews.

In the first place, the professors' opinions and observations were presented in the matrix; in every one of them, there were categories and subcategories (and eventual emergent subcategories). Every subcategory was determined by a frequency of comments or observations which may be positive or negative. After that, the same procedure was followed with the students' answers.

Once the categories were defined and the information decoded in the matrixes, the author carried out a triangulation between data, techniques and settings, with the cooperation of an external auditor.

Results

When asked how competent they felt about educating their future students about sexuality and affectivity issues, a third of prospective teachers declared they felt completely competent to deliver accurate information regarding sexuality matters. The following excerpts from the interviews were translated by the author of this research. Among the reasons why they felt this way, some expressed they had received all the necessary knowledge at high school: "I had all the information I needed at high school, at least I understand the biology of sexuality very well so I could teach it if necessary"; for others, sexual education was part of the responsibilities they had to assume: "it is part of our duty to know this information, because we are the most reliable source". However, almost half of the interviewees recognized they did not have much knowledge themselves, so they could not teach students properly: "my knowledge is subjective, self-taught, so it would be unprofessional to teach others based on google". Besides, they expressed they could teach "perhaps only biological aspects, sexual orientation I don't know, I don't feel confident". Some of these students stated they would feel more prepared if "I could get better education about it, because I know general stuff, I could not go deeper". Similarly, a few students said they had personal issues with these topics, but they would teach them if they had to: "personally, it would be difficult for me to speak about homosexuality or masturbation, maybe biology teachers are better qualified... in the end I would, but I'd feel ashamed, I know". Finally, a group of students declared to be completely unwilling to do this task because of personal conviction: "I have beliefs that prevent me from seeing homosexuality as something good, so I couldn't, even if the school

forces me” and “no, because I disagree with homosexuality, and if I express that, they will think I am a homophobic person and they’ll hate me”. Other opinions pointed at parents: “no, because my thought is that the teacher does not replace parents’ duties, who are the responsible ones to teach them this, not me”. In the same way, few students believed sexual education had no room in their class “teaching those contents has nothing to do with my subject; students’ sexuality is none of my business”.

Regarding the same subject, all professors agreed on the fact that they needed more information about sexuality and its diversity before teaching; nonetheless, they would do it: “in the old times we never spoke about these things, you know. I consider myself an open minded person but LGBTI topics are somewhat new for me, so I’d need to get more education myself first before I teach”; similarly, another professor added “when I was a student, a million years ago, sexuality was completely taboo. Still is... Leaving personal issues aside, I could manage sexual diversity contents very well, but I’d have to study first”.

Concerning the issue of violence and how willing interviewees were to intervene on situations of discrimination or homophobic abuse in the classroom, more than half of prospective teachers declared they had to stop any aggressive circumstances in the classroom, regardless of sexual orientation. The reasons behind were “everyone deserves respect” and “it’s common sense”. On the other hand, a small group of students restrained their intervention according to the complexity of the problem: “I would try, but sometimes it’s too complex and as a teacher there’s little you can do”. “I would try to intervene, but I’d prefer to appeal to other means and people with the wisdom to correct”. Finally, almost a third of future teachers declared they felt unprepared for this task because their teaching program does not cover these issues: “I don’t feel ready for that. This may be because in our curriculum of professional training these issues are not included in depth”; another student said, “I don’t think I can correct a situation if I don’t have the preparation for that”. Moreover, some future teachers thought that sometimes, intervening was pointless: “perhaps I can make a bully stop teasing another child for a while in my class, but then what? The bully will continue to do so elsewhere in another way. There’s nothing we teachers can do”. Similarly, the school was also held accountable for the prospective teachers’ unwillingness to act: “When I was at high school I witnessed so much injustice and indifference from the headmistress

and the administrative staff that I know when I start working things will be the same. Teachers don't have the support to punish or correct violence. The school system does not protect bullied children, they just try to cover their backs”.

On the professors' counterpart, they all believed that at university level violence had different manifestations, less physical than at school: “personally, I have never had to intervene on a fight or something similar here. But if I had to, I would, of course. We cannot forget our role as mediators; we are the ones who promote the instances, so our responsibility is fundamental”. Besides, they agreed on the context of a situation: “If I see two students arguing about personal matters I don't think I should get involved, but if one of them represents a threat or real danger to the other person, that's a different thing”. Professors also referred to the subtle expressions of violence “in general students do not engage in physical violence, but they bully through jokes or ironic comments. Sometimes you see in the class how they compete to be the best... the one who speaks a better English laughs at the one who can't pronounce properly or forgets a word. Some criticize to destroy, not to help”. Similarly, they also coincided on the fact that this kind of behavior was difficult to modify: “nowadays being aggressive is a sign of strong character, whereas being kind hearted is a weakness. Everyone wants to be a badass, not a loser. The world sends you that message, so as long as this continues, the violence -in all its forms- will never be eradicated”.

On the subject of including gender diversity themes in the curriculum of pedagogy programs, the majority of students considered it a vital issue on teacher formation: “it could be part of a subject, as a unit inside the cross curricular subjects at least”; besides, they viewed these topics as a tool: “yes, I consider professional preparation necessary to know how to react and inform properly”; “ I believe this would help us to develop more empathy”; “yes, I consider it necessary for the future teachers, so they can express themselves in the right way and with real foundations, to avoid bringing their own prejudices in the classrooms”. Similarly, some students recognized its importance in the construction of social roles: “it is our duty as future teachers to help our students in every sense, so our country becomes an exemplary nation, where every person feels happy and dignified”. Showing a different point of view, a small group of students believed these issues were not necessary in their academic programs : “with the subjects we already have it is enough”, and “if you want to know more about this you can search yourself”. Equally, a similar amount of

students thought it was not part of their role as educators: “I believe parents have to teach their children, not teachers”; as well as other students refused on moral principles: “to me, including gender diversity themes means to promote that lifestyle, which, as I said before, I disagree with;” whereas some expressed concern of making differences between the students: “I disagree with emphasizing this topic and give special treatment to homosexuals, as if they were poor innocent people”.

When asked about this subject, all professors showed interest on innovating curriculum: “anything that makes us better should be implemented” and regarded it as helpful “the more tools I have, the better I can help”. Additionally, they believed these issues had to be reinforced with other skills: “it is also necessary to deliver emotional competencies, which have to do with assertiveness, frustration management and effective communication in general”. Similarly, more practical tools were suggested: “improving group management skills is vital here. The way the teacher handles the group and how he or she is able to convey the message will decide if this ends as a failure or a success”. However, some professors pointed at possible obstacles to the insertion of these issues: “we cannot force prospective teachers to receive this training. Many people disagree for several reasons, and that’s respectable too. However, I agree we should work to produce a cultural change, rather than imposing”. Additionally, they alluded to the students’ personal characteristics: “to teach these things you need to confront your own issues first, and I believe some people are not willing to do that. Perhaps it will be a slow process, but I think it can be achieved”.

Conclusions and discussion

This study attempted to describe how the inclusion of sexual education and LGBTI diversity issues could help prospective teachers on their practice and in the promotion of safe and tolerant environments for students through the application of a semi-structured interview. The results of this study show that most of prospective students, together with their professors, acknowledge the importance these issues have and regard them as part of their teaching responsibilities. Nevertheless, the major obstacle they face is the lack of formal knowledge. Even though they do not consider themselves completely ignorant on the matter of sexuality and its

diversity, they consider it is necessary to base knowledge on a common solid ground of accuracy and objectivity, leaving aside myths and other preconceived ideas.

The issue of violence shows similar results, as most of students and professors expressed they would intervene on an episode of homophobic harassment out of their sense of justice to all, especially on a physically violent incident. Nonetheless, a great group manifested concern about circumstances escaping the physical struggle, such as not having the wisdom to guide and change the situation in the long term. Again students pointed at the absence of tools on practical terms, which many feel their teaching training should provide.

Finally, regarding the inclusion of gender diversity themes on their teaching training, almost all of students and all professors agreed on innovating curriculum, connecting it with the responsibility they felt to transmit accurate information to their students. Even though a small group thought otherwise, the majority believes it is a worthwhile project.

The results of this investigation demonstrate that ignorance, not indifference, is the barrier to an effective change in the teacher-students relations, as well as the interventions teachers could make when witnessing bullying. Evidence shows that in order to meet LGBTI students' needs, teachers should be knowledgeable about the cultural issues that affects them, as well as being able to examine their own belief system regarding these topics. This way teachers will be able to relate positively to all students, regardless of their sexual orientation. However, it is relevant to clarify that the aim of including sexuality and LGBTI issues on teaching training does not imply that teachers need to modify their values or beliefs, but rather look at them and assess them, with the objective of developing supportive relationships, respectful of people's individuality.

The purpose of schools is not only teaching academic subjects, but also contributing to the students' development of a sense of self. Living and expressing one's sexual orientation without fear is part of such development, as well as an element of a person's identity. Understanding diversity is respecting human rights; an ideal that all educators should uphold.

Among the limitations this study had, the most important was the reduced sample available for the study, as well as a lack of representation from other majors. Similarly, this investigation did not consider demographic variables, such as ethnicity, religious belief, geographic regions, etc. These variables could be taken into consideration to enrich further research.

As a final word, during the process of this work several questions emerged in relation to the actual inclusion of gender and LGBTI issues on the different programs related to education training, which would diversify and empower future teachers' practices: Is it possible to manage a new subject that deals with LGBTI issues and what should it include? Or is there willingness to be more explicit on gender policies regarding teacher training? It would be very interesting to develop an intervention or an experimental study that fosters awareness and assesses personal traits regarding these issues. Unfortunately, this investigation leaves questions which are not possible to answer yet. However, there is always hope someone tries.

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