102083 - Assessment 1

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All children are entitled to equal educational opportunities in Australia, regardless of gender and sexuality. However, many students continue to be marginalized and face inequitable opportunities in schools resulting in disparate achievement.

Dominant discourse refers to mainstream narrative and expectations around a topic, often influenced by those in power. Butler (1988) explores the phenomenology of heterosexual gender binaries through feminist theory in "*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,*" critiquing "cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes" and assuming 'natural' gendered appearances and heterosexual disposition (p.525), highlighting heteronormativity as dominant discourse, and setting up gender and sexuality diversity as a divergence. When groups or individuals deviate from dominant discourse, marginalisation can occurs when they are treated as insignificant or of lesser importance, resulting in inequitable opportunities and imbalance of power. Within the context of secondary education, gender and sexuality diverse students are often marginalised. This occurrence can impact quality of education, wellbeing and potential for academic success.

Student marginalisation will be explored through representation of gender and sexuality in the curriculum by method of theoretical analysis of gender norms with conjunctive critique of its cultural enforcement explored in "*Gender and sexuality diversity in a culture of limitation*" (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020). The impact of heterosexual cisgender dominance will be analysed in

relation to empirical data and examples from the study "*Free2Be?:*"(Ullman, 2015) and "*Understanding sociological theory for educational practices*" (Ferfolja et al., 2018), delving into student experiences marginalisation, bullying and its impact on wellbeing and achievement. Furthermore, hegemonic cultural influence will be evaluated in wider contexts, utilising case studies regarding the power of rhetoric, religion and visibility, to extract impact on student identity, access to opportunity and achievement.

These challenges will be evaluated in relation to intersections of power, policy and teaching methods, and their contribution to the reduction of increase of marginalisation within the classroom.

Feminist frameworks view gender as social construction which enforce binaries of inequities under hegemonic masculinity. Ferfolja and Ullman regards the marginalisation of sexuality and gender diverse students as a 'culture of limitation,' imposing cisgender binaries in education. Gender is not static, but rather "an identity instituted through a stylised repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988, p.519), implying its construction involves scaffolding elements of identity, which are fluid, in order to build "hegemonic masculinities and femininities" (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020, p.62). Curriculum has the power to enforce or break these rigid boundaries.

Ferfolja and Ullman cites and array of sources supporting "inclusion of gender and sexuality diversity related content in the curriculum to reduce discrimination and inequity in schools" (p.35). Despite this, the rhetoric of 'moral panic' (p.34) is used to maintain "heteronormative social order" (Robinson, 2008, as cited in Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020, p.36). Ferfolja and Ullman uses an example of a teacher in NSW who undertook an empathy task in class

"in relation to being gay or lesbian" (p.40). Despite initial school endorsement, media outrage resulted in lack of support by the Education Minister and subsequent banning of the material (2020), demonstrating teaching dilemma when tackling inclusive content integration. The lack of policy backing, powered by sensationalist media, underpins the rhetoric of inclusive material, as a weapon against heterosexuality, "brainwashing" students (Devine, 2012, as cited in Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020, p.42). The repeated use of this rhetoric in response to subsequent efforts of inclusion severely underplays the power of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich, 1988, as cited in Ferfolja & Ullman 2020, p.62), and simultaneously undermines the importance of inclusion for students' wellbeing, creating hostile school environments for students who do not conform to the discourse. By positioning homophobia in schools as unacceptable, without addressing necessary curriculum inclusion and representation, the onus is on students who are 'different' to adjust to the norm. Students remain marginalised until we can reposition these norms to not only accommodate, but include them.

Reinforcing constructed gender norms sets students of diverse gender, and sexual preference apart from peers, impacting student social wellbeing and academic performance. Reports of marginalising experiences for gender and sexuality diverse students in Australia include "verbal abuse, such as homophobic and transphobic slurs; physical intimidation and bullying; psychological intimidation; social isolation; spreading rumours; and cyberbullying." (Ullman, 2018, p.65). A study of 704 secondary students of diverse gender and sexuality nationwide, indicate that 94% have heard homophobic language used at school, 58% of them daily; some in earshot of staff; of which under 5% indicated intervention occurrence (Ullman, 2015, p.7). Faced with conflict between upholding dominant values and caring for the

wellbeing of students, teachers are left with little room to act. Just under 40% of teachers intervened by 'ignoring' the situation, 'indifference' or turning a 'blind eye.' Whilst approximately 25% mentioned attempts to intervene by teachers involved minimal elaboration into implications of homophobia. However, when intervention did occur participants reported significant positive outcomes and feeling of wellbeing, community inclusion and school support (Ullman, 2015), as well as better academic motivation. Ullman cites "growing body of international research" outlining perceived belonging, as means to combat "school-based stressors and lowered levels of social and academic investment in school" (p.18).

On the other hand, experiences of alienation can pave way for student disaffection. Negative effects on mental health can include suicidal ideation in severe cases. "Suicide attempts" are 4 times higher for "gender and sexuality–diverse youth," "than that of heterosexual youth" (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016, as cited in Ferfolja, 2018, p.46). Decreased feelings of wellbeing and loss of interest, also correlate with increased truancy, impaired academic performance and disruptions in schooling (Ferfolja, 2018). Butler (1988) implies gender is an act, suggesting "nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one's gender," which is met with "sanctions and proscriptions" (p.525), It is worth noting that "being or seeming gay" was among the top three reasons Australian students were bullied (Rigby, 2015, as cited in Ullman, 2015). Given the detrimental effects of bullying, this is an indication that the dominance of heteronormativity creates problematic archetypes regardless of gender identity or sexual preference but can severely affect the wellbeing of gender and sexuality diverse students.

The broader cultural structures are worth examining in relation its influence on educational environments and set gendered expectations for students and teachers. Ferfolja and Stavrou (2014) found that 80% of 159 non-heterosexual teachers surveyed, "consciously hid their sexuality at work" to some extent (Ferfolja, 2018, p.45), indicating that teachers still face scrutiny about sexuality in workplaces with hetero-centric values, which by extension begs the question of how students can safely navigate an environment, where even teachers; with more relative power; must uphold double lives. The invisibility of homosexuality amongst staff can translate to societal expectations of students and influence their evaluation of self. Furthermore Jones et al. (2014) explores the permittance of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in religious school in legislation at national and state levels (as cited in Ferfolja, 2018, p.45), emphasising hegemonic heterosexuality in broader society.

An example of the prevalence of gendered expectation today is the media controversy surrounding comments made by a principal of a single-sex secondary school in NSW, regarding student dress at the swimming carnival. A video recording of the speech circulated, depicting the principal advising female pupils not to wear "stringy, skimpy or revealing clothes" to avoid "compromise" to the "employment" of "male teachers." This assumption about gender binaries, imply that male teachers are unprofessional and unable to control their behaviour, whilst placing emphasis on the male gaze, whereby the appearance of young girls are depicted as responsible for speculative behaviour of men. Despite claims of remorse, the principal continues to defend her position, indicating that she was not attacking students "that may have gender-identity issues" (Stuart, 2021), implying that gender identity, other than an assumed norm is an 'issue,' to be resolved. These expectations have basis in damaging presumptions about students and teachers, whilst

enforcing a constructed gender narrative which excludes students who may not conform to such a narrative. The principal was scrutinised but continues her position at the school, further emphasising the acceptance of this narrative in dominant discourse.

The culture of limitation, examined above, extends beyond classrooms, where "perspectives, beliefs and attitudes" intertwine to "thwart the country's development towards becoming a more progressive and equitable society." (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020, p.3). Butler aligns the embodiment of gender with "possibilities both conditioned and circumscribed by historical convention", alluding to the fluid and historical nature of gender construction (p.521). Enforcing dated values would in turn reproduce a "historical situation" (Butler, 1988, p.521) which silences, marginalises and displaces diverse identities in the dominant narrative.

The dominant discourse surrounding gender and sexuality, dictates the culture of limitation in Australia and alienates individuals who stray from this narrative. The power of media rhetoric, cultural and curriculum representation; or lack thereof, operates to enforce this discourse, engaging 'moral panic' to coerce under-representation of diversity. Within the limitations of hegemonic heteronormativity, other intersections of power exist such as, educational governing bodies; including the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) and its state-level counterpart the NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA), principals in schools, and teachers in the classroom; differentiated by the visibility of individual gender and sexuality identity. Each party: with relative power over marginalised students, partake in enforcing the dominant discourse or challenging it with inclusivity.

The participation of power players intersects with policy limitations. ACARA must adhere to The Australian Education Act (Australian Government 2013), which excludes mention of gender and sexuality, but includes that schooling experiences must provide "an environment and curriculum that supports all school students to their full potential" (p.5), and passes responsibility of discrimination laws to the discretion of the state. Despite gender and sexually diversity being "areas of ongoing discrimination in schools" (Ferfolja, 2018, p.52), the NSW Department of Education has no dedicated inclusion policy for these students under "Access and Equity." Section 1.8, under "Bullying Prevention and Response", merely lists "sexual orientation" as one of the targets of bullying behaviours (NSW Department of Education, 2010), demonstrating tolerance rather than inclusion of marginalised students.

This is exponentiated with a recent proposal for "Education Legislation Amendment (Parental Rights) Bill 2020" which attempts to "prohibit" and "ensure that curriculum, syllabuses, and courses of instruction at all levels of schooling do not include," "teaching of gender fluidity" (p.1), accentuating requirement for NESA to monitor compliance of government schools. Framed under the rhetoric of granting parental freedom about "core values" (Latham, 2020, p.1), if passed, this would instigate regression of policy from tentative inclusion based on school policy, to curriculum exclusion. This will stymie development of inclusive policy by schools, and classroom material by teachers. If pass, this would be detrimental to the wellbeing of students affected and their chances at an equitable education.

Pre-service teachers operate with "anxiety and fear about what they can do," facing conflict between social progress with gender and sexuality identity,

and the pushback perpetuating "understandings about these communities as taboo knowledge for young people" (Ferfolja & Ullman, 2020, p.viii). Teachers operate under "deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations" of gender (Buter, 1988) where attraction to the opposite sex, and notions of men and women as fundamentally different is assumed (Ullman, 2018). Within this framework, teachers can fall into deficit thinking about student disaffection, and impact achievement. To reduce student marginalisation within the confines of power dynamics, teachers need to provide an equitable learning space for academic achievement, by aiming to reduce unnecessarily gendered, language and presumptions, which requires constant self reflection.

When teachers have solid boundaries and guidelines "that explicitly include gender and sexuality diversity in their policies", they are "more likely to intercede" and better support affected students (Ferfolja, 2018, pg.45). Despite limitation, "studies have demonstrated that education about gender and sexuality diversity can reduce bullying and increase feelings of safety for these students" (Guasp, 2012, as cited in Ferfolja, 2018, p.48). Integration of inclusive material can aid in student wellbeing, whilst allowing students the freedom to research topics of personal alignment, can activate cognitive schemas to create more equitable assessment.

The existence of gender and sexuality diversity in the periphery of education, will inevitably affect student opportunity for academic success. Demonstrated by the enforcement of heteronormativity in classroom curriculum and cultural representation. The effect of socially prescribed gender binaries on the experiences of these students can lead feelings of social alienation,

disaffection and marginalisation, apparent through the analysis of feminist theory, power structures, policy, and teaching methods. These experiences can negatively impact mental health and cause disparate academic performance.

These students face inequitable representation in learning material, bullying and social isolation, with minimal response from authority, reinforcing their differences as tolerated, not embraced. This invisibility of gender and sexuality fluidity is marginalising, enforced by lack of, or misrepresentation, in public political debate, media, teacher identity, policy and rhetoric around constructed gender roles. Such challenges act collectively to disempower students and detract from academic achievement. For teachers to create safe and equitable classrooms for gender and sexuality diverse student, they require clear guidelines around inclusivity, supported by the power and autonomy to execute inclusive material and intervene with alienating behaviour, without the threat of negative career repercussion. Dominant discourse of heteronormativity must be broken down, in order to rebuild an inclusive teaching and learning environment, which reduces bullying, removes gender identity as an issue of public debate, and builds on the self-esteem of students, in order to bridge the gaps in education and power structures, to create a truly equitable learning environment.

Word count: 2198

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