SCHOOL AND HOMOPHOBIA: VIOLENCE JUSTIFIED AS JOKES

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ABSTRACT
The discussion about LGBTQ issues has been expanded over the last years, especially in relation to the violence against their rights. In this context, the proposed work aims to discuss the pejorative terms that gays constantly experience in the school environment, which may be considered “mere jokes” by students, teachers and school counselors, at first. Based on the testimony of the interviewees, we seek to understand how such “jokes” are seen by those who experience them. It represents a type of violence that is silenced by the school (Louro, 2009, 2013; Junqueira, 2009), but that directly affects gay people there and in their private lives. Therefore, it is necessary to open a dialogue regarding this subject at school in an attempt to enforce their rights, especially in relation to diversity.

KEYWORDS
School; homophobia; pejorative terms; rights

Homosexuality: a cultural-historical understanding

In order to understand the creation of the term homosexuality (and the justification for its marginalization), it is relevant to inform that sexuality is built over a lifetime, receiving the influence of each culture that constitutes it. In other words, it is possible to affirm that sexuality, along with all the issues of gender, is socially constructed.

[...] Sexuality is not only a personal issue, but also a social and political one. [...] sexuality is “learned”, or better saying, it is constructed over a lifetime on many ways by each person. Bodies have social meaning. The inscription of gender - male or female - in the bodies is always made in the context of a particular culture and, thus, carry the marks of this culture. The possibilities of sexuality - of ways to express the desires and pleasures - is always socially established and codified. Gender and sexual identities are, in this way, composed and defined by social relations, they are shaped by networks of power in a society (Louro, 2000, page 11).

Considering Western society, which is typically influenced by Christian and Greco-Roman cultures, heterosexuality was established as the standard to be followed, defining its “natu-
“naturalness” in society. Since the standard was established (heteronormativity), other relationships (gay, bisexual, transsexual and transgender) are placed as deviant from it. It is worth highlighting that heterosexuality is grouped with other social categories, especially those related to race/ethnicity and social class. This is why:

[…] historically, the rule that was established refers to the Christian heterosexual middle class white man and it becomes a reference that no longer needs to be named. The “other” social subjects are the ones to become “marked”, they will be defined and named based on that reference. Therefore, women are represented as “the second sex” and gays and lesbians are described as deviants from the heterosexual pattern (Louro, 2000, page 15).

By defining heterosexuals as the model to be followed, those who do not fit this pattern are marginalized. Consequently, it generates stigmas in relation to sexual orientation, male and female homosexuals, bisexuals, transgendered, and transsexuals. Considering that heteronormativity was assimilated by society, people who do not fit this pattern tend to be verbally degraded, excluded from groups and even suffer physical violence.

The socially institutionalized belief, according to which there would only exist one legitimate way to live masculinity and femininity and a unique “healthy and normal” way for people to express themselves sexually – heterosexuality, is causing subjects who do not fit this representation to be marginalized and feel as if they were “deviant”, “aberrations”, “against nature” (Ribeiro et al, 2009, page 199).

However, for the heteronormativity to be set, it is necessary that institutions transmit it, reinforcing its ideology, defining it as the “right” standard to be followed within society. Among relevant institutions in this process, we can mention church, family, and school.

In order to make these marks effective, a significant investment is put into action: family, school, media, church, and law take part in this production. All these institutions perform some kind of pedagogy, they make an investment that often appears in a very articulated manner, reiterating identities and hegemonic practices while they subordinate, deny or refuse other identities and practices; some other times, however, those authorities provide different, alternative, contradictory representations (Louro, 2000, page 25).

As a basic principle, such institutions have to reinforce the idea that being heterosexual is something “natural”, not admitting other possibilities: the church does it by bringing a moral discourse on Christian values grounded in their holy book. The family is considered the main core of human formation, responsible for transmitting highly required values. And the school represents the institution that not only has the objective of developing aware and responsible individuals who will become fair citizens, but also reinforces principles - such as heteronormativity - considered socially “normal”. The author adds:

Despite all variations, contradictions, and weaknesses that characterize this cultural investment, society intentionally tries, through multiple strategies and tactics, to “establish” a lasting “normal” male or female identity (Louro, 2000, page 25).
School and homophobia: the justified verbal violence as jokes

The school has an essential role in society, especially considering that its main function is the formation of individuals to experience citizenship to the fullest, going through the educational processes of literacy - socialization – identity construction (among many other functions), thus, preparing individuals for life:

The school is committed to ensuring that boys and girls become real men and women, which means that men and women must meet the hegemonic standards of masculinity and femininity (Severo, 2013, page 35).

In this formation process, heteronormativity is taught in many different ways during school routines, in which “boys and girls are exposed to messages about how to behave, what is expected from them, what they are allowed or not, and even what is ‘normal’ for them to like or not” (Teixeira, 2010, page 41). Activities such as playing with toys or playing games reinforce certain behaviors at school, where boys should develop their “manhood/virility” and girls should develop their “sensitivity”. For instance, there are balls and cars as toys for boys, and dolls and household items such as toys for girls, pointing out which roles the kids must play in the future. According to Felipe & Bello (2009), “the games and toys are, therefore, in this context, a powerful tool that is constantly driven to set/produce certain forms of gender” (page 150), in which the “thematic concerning homosexuality, bisexualities and transgenderism is invisible in the curriculum, the textbooks, and even in discussions on human rights at school” (Junqueira, 2009, page 30).

That being said, heterosexuality is more than only taught. It is experienced by all individuals in that environment as something “natural” to every human, excluding other possibilities. However, as sexuality is also culturally constructed, the interest and “curiosity” about other orientations are recurrent at many different ages and are not taken into account in the school environment. “The school refuses to receive and recognize differences among its public, being ‘indifferent to differences’” (Junqueira, 2009, page 30). Soares & Fernandes (2009) corroborate it when they report existing events within schools:

There is a cultivated and enhanced silencing of homosexuality, homosexual people, and their way of living. It’s a type of silence that produces and reproduces other sayings, and ways of seeing and behaving. Institutionally, debates regarding sexual diversity are avoided, and people continue to obstinately and openly teach and support thoughts and actions that discriminate, marginalize and stigmatize those who are considered homosexuals (Page 207-208).

By teaching practices that determine a specific way of experiencing gender, the school does not see other possibilities, allowing some sort of omission, frequently justifying homophobic name calling as a “game” that should not be taken seriously. If the school reinforces heteronormativity, how are the ones who do not follow this pattern expected to feel? How do boys and girls feel when they hear or read gender-related pejorative terms that depreciate them? Do they see those terms as a mere joke? If not, how do those boys and girls feel about them? What are their responses to the “jokes”? Do they take the issues to teachers and school coordinators? If so, how does the school react? If not, why don’t they do it? Under-
standing these and other issues related to the aforementioned terms is important for the school to become an environment not only of civic education, but also of practices that value the respect for diversity and freedom, which are essential to the exercise of citizenship.

In 2004, the program *Brasil sem Homofobia* (Brazil without Homophobia) was created, and its main goals were “promoting the citizenship of gays, lesbians, transvestites, transgenders and bisexuals for equal rights, and combating violence and homophobic discrimination, respecting the specificity of each person in the group” (page 11). This program was a response to the increasing levels of violence suffered by the LGBT people. According to a survey⁵ that took place in Rio de Janeiro, 56.3% of respondents affirmed that had already “gone through experiences such as name calling, verbal abuse, and threats related to homosexuality” (page 17). Therefore, concerned about not achieving the LGBT rights, the program established guiding principles for working on the subject in different levels/social institutions, including education/school.

In relation to schools, and based on the UNESCO research (2004)⁶ that took place in 14 Brazilian capitals regarding homophobic violence within schools, nearly 40% of students and their parents/guardians said they would not have a homosexual as a colleague⁷. It is also informed that, in schools, the most common type of violence is found especially in language, through the use of pejorative terms such as fagot, homo and queer (page 287).

It is essential to highlight the language used because it portrays the worldviews, representations, and also name calling with negative purposes aiming at humiliating, discriminating, offending, ignoring, isolating, oppressing and threatening. (Abramovay et al, 2004, page 286)

How can we reinforce the speech about respect and citizenship in the school if the use of pejorative terms to lessen students who do not meet the socially imposed standards is constant? Regarding the required behavior, an interviewee⁸ states the following:

During my childhood, what I usually heard from my own family was definitely the word ‘fagot’. Anything I would do that was out of the heteronormative behavior (what I remember the most is talking too much or in a high-pitched girly voice) they would say ‘ya acting like a fagot’. [. . .] Regarding school, just because of my music, movies and TV preferences (they were pretty much everything to me, like High School Musical, Disney Channel, Hanna Montana and so on) everybody had already formed an opinion about me (…) because, in the eyes of any other boy in my classroom, those things were considered girl things, gay/queer/fagot stuff⁹ (João, 18)

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⁶ Research coordinated by Abramovay, M., Castro, M. G. and Silva, L. B.

⁷ The research informed little about lesbians, but the intensity of violence is the same (page 284).

⁸ Two senior students from Sabará/MG were interviewed, one from a public high school and the other from a private one. Both assumed their sexuality in High School (João e Joaquim). Another interviewee has recently graduated and assumed his sexuality afterwards (José) in order to preserve their integrity the names have been modified.

⁹ In Brazil, the terms faggot and queer are used for men in a pejorative way, because they reduce their manhood (virile and dominant) to a feminine condition (sensibility). It is important to highlight that the terms are not only used for men that admitted to be gay, but for whoever shows sensibility, going against to what society considers it is necessary to be a man as Louro (2013), Junqueira (2009) among others demonstrate in their researches.
The interviewee shows that, ever since his childhood, he has been listening to insults just because he does not behave the way society considers normal. When asked about his feelings towards those terms, he states that he used to be ashamed as if he had done something inexcusable and the blame would come along, even if, at that time, he did not understand the reason. It is perceived that the terms used defined not only an unacceptable behavior for society, but also conveyed depreciative characteristics aiming to diminish the individual. That can be seen by analyzing the individual’s feelings towards something he was not able to comprehend.

Regarding the school, it is noticed that, due to his fondness for things considered appropriate only for girls, the interviewee was prejudicially labeled. “Many teachers work in collusion with discrimination and prejudice against homosexuals by considering expressions with negative connotation as jokes, unimportant words.” (Abramovay et al., 2004, page 277).

About those “jokes”, the interviewees stated that such words had always intended to disparage them and that they felt uncomfortable when they listened to them. One individual reported the following: “When I was at school, I had always been restrained. It was something nobody should know, but name calling was constant. I was called fagot, fag, homo and even queer” (José, 19). During the conversation, the same individual informed that just because he liked to dance, it was an excuse for the students to insult him verbally at school. Another interviewee (Joaquim, 19) narrated some different terms the other students used to call him, such as cock watcher10 and tacky queer11 and the individual did not even know what they meant. Regarding those terms and how they are faced by people at schools, a UNESCO research contributed to the analysis informing that even the faculty corroborates this violence by being silent or by talking to the students and acting as if they were part of a joke.

Some teachers comment that, in spite of homosexuality being approached due to a respect concern, it is quite difficult to deal with the matter, for the students never take it seriously. Others assume a distancing attitude culminating in a passive connivance with violence against young people thought to be gay. Each person is or could be whatever/whomever they want to. In some other cases, they disregard the issue as something that is not their concern. Thus, debates about topics that are engendered by prejudice and discrimination are omitted and, when there are debates, those are about abstract tolerance conveying the idea that anyone can be whatever they want, even though in practice that does not happen. (Abramovay et al., 2004, page 288)

As indicated, it is common that the use of such terms is seen either as a joke or in a way that it is not given due importance, both to the teachers and to the school’s administrative staff. In relation to this problem, one interviewee informed that “if teachers bothered to lecture them a bit, that would be it” (João). The same interviewee clarified that those “jokes” became constant, part of their routines, and then:

Since ninth grade, when I started to consider admitting myself as being gay, the mockery was getting more and more usual and it ended up in bullying […]. MSN was common at that

10 Referring to some men who stare at other man’s genitals.

11 A poorly dressed gay who does not possess the glamour usually associated with the homosexual community. Lack of style. Found in Dicionário Informal.
time and I used to receive messages FULL of insults about me. I can’t remember what they used to say, but they were horrible. If I’m not mistaken, they had threats of physical violence, I guess. (João)

It is observed that the terms used not only represented physical violence, but also developed psychological abuse at that time, for that individual cannot remember which terms were used. However, he makes clear that they were FULL of insults. When asked about the school’s position, the interviewee declared that:

When the situation was brought to the school’s attention, X, the coordinator, fully supported the cause, whereas when Y, principal and owner of the school, knew about it, Y said that what had happened didn’t concern the school. Then, she couldn’t do much. (João)

Another interviewee said:

I went to the vice-principal and principal’s office. The only answer I got was this one: ‘There will always be prejudice. So, the solution is to overcome it’. I complained about the offensive jokes, but there wasn’t a fast response to that from the school; some teachers talked about homosexuality; once I was called by the supervisor. I went to her room and she talked about prejudice and such, but she only talked, very little was done about it. (Joaquim)

As noted, very little or no attention is paid whatsoever to the complaints or to the students who feel humiliated by those terms, resulting in what authors (Louro, 2009, 2013; Junqueira, 2009, among others) define the school’s attitude towards homophobia as silencing. If the schools tend to be silent, how does the student facing such jokes feel? What are the possible consequences for students’ formation in the schools? One of the interviewees (José) narrated that when he listened to the pejorative words, he used to feel very bad, but kept everything to himself. Another adds that he “practically faced that alone” (João) whereas Joaquim said that listening to such offensive words made it difficult to be fine. He used to be sad whenever that happened and did not want to go to school. Here, in addition to demonstrating that students felt bad and inferior due to the terms, one interviewee provided information that reinforces the intensity that these “jokes” generate: “I did not feel like going to school.” According to some authors and the UNESCO research, a large proportion of students is dropping out of school due to the prejudice they continuously suffer within its environment and do not find support to continue their studies, as the author quotes when he analyzed some consequences in relation to the problems that the LGBT public has because of prejudice and discrimination in the schools:

It is hard to deny that homophobia in schools exercises an effect of deprivation of rights on each one of these students. For instance, it affects their subjective well-being; it interferes in the social relation among all the students, and also among students and the education professionals; it disturbs the expectations towards school success and development; it induces intimidation, insecurity, stigmatization, segregation and isolation; it stimulates a simulation to hide indifference; it generates disinterest in school; it provokes age-grade distortion, abandonment and evasion; it harms the inclusion in the labor market; it rises distorted visibility; it weakens students, both psychologically and physically; it disturbs the
configuration and identity expression process; it affects self-esteem; it influences social affective life; it hinders homoparental and transgender families integration in the school community and stigmatizes their children. (Junqueira, 2009, pages 24-25)

Students not only silence themselves in face of the homophobia they have been suffering, but some of them drop out of school due to the aggressive environment, as seen in the interviewee’s statements and also in the analysis above. For this reason, it is necessary to open people’s eyes to the existing assaults, which are constantly justified as mere jokes that should not be taken seriously by the victim.

If the school as an institution seeks to educate individuals to be good citizens, it must be aware of the existing diversity (ethnic, religious, sexual…) and promote effective campaigns that are capable of raising awareness about the importance of respect. The silence results in distancing schools from one of the functions of education:

Preparing people for living with the differences through the production of feelings and attitudes of fraternity, solidarity and equal rights, valuing the collective and ensuring access to information, without which it is impossible for people to build their citizenship. (Peres, 2009, page 249)

In conclusion, we must build an environment not only capable of dialogues about sexuality, but also create effective mechanisms which guarantee an environment of mutual respect. For this, projects involving awareness and aiming at the faculty and administrative improvement are necessary. Besides that, it is paramount to work in different ways in the classroom demonstrating how diversity is beneficial.

I emphasize here the importance of not only listening, but of creating measures related to the rights and duties and their implementation. After all, “fagot” and “queer” are not mere jokes. On the contrary, they are terms that represent a homophobic view of the individual, exposing students to ridicule in the school environment. And, as an interviewee said referring to the question of homophobia within the school environment, “some things are so rooted that do not go away easily” (João).

Bibliography


