

Heteronormative Encouragement and Favoring Gender Roles within School Systems in the
Twenty-First Century

by

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A CAPSTONE PROJECT

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the acknowledgement

Honors Distinction

Social & Behavioral Sciences
School of Psychology

TYLER JUNIOR COLLEGE
Tyler, Texas

Spring 2019

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to analyze the predilection of heteronormative comportment within various school environments (elementary, intermediate, and high school). The extent of heteronormative encouragement, including favoring gender roles, will be determined through observational study. The psychological occurrences between students and teachers generally shape the perspectives of the pupils. While the curricula determine what the students learn concerning academics, the societal undertones that are implemented by the teachers are what affixes to the psyche of malleable minds. The study consists of three schools - two classes from each grade level of which will be photographed and carefully observed during a normal school day during the week. The classes observed will be that of English and literature due to the fact that the area of study is fairly flexible in what material the class is exposed to (various books, poetry, etc.) The particular methods used to gather quantitative information will be that of ethnography and a dispersal of questionnaires to the students from each grade. The independent variable in this study would ultimately be the how the students/teachers answer the questionnaires. The dependent variable would be how the class acts and what I observe during the ethnographic sessions. The populations involved would be chosen by purposeful sampling. The theoretical framework this research is based off of is Queer theory, the theory that observes, specifically, the differences between sex, gender, and desire. It is important to look back on this theory throughout the course of research in order to maintain a base for information concerning how society reacts to non-heteronormative ways of living. Students are an ideal population to observe because their surroundings can largely regulate what they do and what they decide to indulge in. The support that is evident (or not) by authority figures can have a monumental impact on how these adolescents decide to embrace themselves. To relate the impressionable personas of these individuals in with this study, it is important to look at how heteronormative

standards are implemented day-to-day, and how that possibly affects the personal outlooks of gender/sexuality. The goal of this project is to support the hypothesis that heteronormative encouragement and gender roles are still alive and well in the school system, and to shed light on just how much of an effect they have on students themselves and how the teachers shape their curriculum. If the information gathered supports this case, then this study could be used to improve the policy of the education system, and aid it in becoming a more inclusive environment for all types of individuals.

Review of the Literature

Heteronormativity in the middle school population is largely under-researched and overlooked. This is incredibly ironic due to the fact that the most change (physically) is occurring during the time period of 6th grade to 8th grade. In this particular area of study, there are numerous findings of the effect that heteronormativity has on students in primary school and tertiary school, but the middle area is more so of a blur. Although looking at the impressionable, young students and the older, more experienced students is valuable, observing the students who are undergoing once-in-a-lifetime changes is arguably even more valuable. The social concerns during this particular period of life are numerous as the environments are changing and the relationships between students and their parents, friends, and educators are becoming more serious and intricate. The heteronormative ideals that are pushed upon the students, not only in the classrooms, but in their daily life has a substantial effect on this particular age group. Identity crises are at an all-time high as people find their niches and cliques. This can be seen internationally, as adolescence is a troubling, challenging time for all individuals. The sources used for this potential research look at heteronormativity according to age, culture, and norms that are seen in different environments.

Preschool and Primary School

My resources that looked at Preschool and Primary school were important to the quality of the research because it provided a base of information for the research to be based upon. Two sources focused on this particular age group: *Gender and childhood sexuality in primary school* (Bhana, D. 2016), and *Reproducing (and Disrupting) Heteronormativity: Gendered Sexual Socialization in Preschool Classrooms* (Gansen, H.M. 2017). Bhana's work is an ethnography that includes students and teachers in primary school (mainly grades 1 through 2). Bhana looks at the differences between gender roles in males and females and how they are promoted in this early stage of life. As gender develops and self-awareness does as well, she looks at how the students interact and support the set norms that have been shown by their parents and teachers. She looks at the constructs that are set in this environment and how the masculine and feminine characteristics are rewarded. Gansen's work, on the other hand, describes the environment of preschool classrooms as the beginning of heteronormative ideals being forced upon children at a young age. She describes the teachers as "agents of sexual socialization", using her research to support the idea that heteronormative ways of life are encouraged at this age, and onward. However, over the 9 preschools that she observed, it was clear that very few teachers never condemned any ideas that were different from heterosexuality. Some, on the other hand, encouraged the gender roles within the classroom (girls playing with "girl toys", boys playing with "boy toys". Her research finally stated that students enter elementary school knowing that heterosexuality is normative, and that gender roles prevailed in order to be "normal".

Literature in Secondary School

As this research is revolved around the budding ages of Secondary school, it was imperative to have a few sources revolving around the possible literature being taught to the children in this age group. With English and Choir/Theatre being incredibly flexible and

relatively accepting of new ways of being and philosophies, these classes could have some of the strongest influences on students, in general. I focused on *Hacking Heteronormativity and Remixing Rhymes: Enacting a Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy in Middle Grades English Language Arts* (Wargo, J.M 2017), in addition to *Integrating Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgender topics and their intersections with other areas of difference into the leadership preparation curriculum: Practical ideas and strategies* (Capper, C.A. et al 2006), and *LGBTQ literature in middle school classrooms: possibilities for challenging heteronormative environments* (Dinkins, E.G. et al 2015).

To begin, Wargo observes the lack of energy that has been put into sustaining cultural, sexual, etc. differences in the educational environment by authority in schools. This research particularly looks at the literature that is taught within middle grades, and how stereotypes like the “princess” can be flipped to be more gender inclusive. The binary focus of femininity and masculinity is strong within middle grades, and the expectation of these categories are even stronger. He describes the differences in definitions of key words that relate to the LGBT community/fight for inclusiveness. To pair with the ideology expressed in his work, Capper discusses the situation of advocating for social justice within a school system that ignores the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community. By researching the common harassment of LGBT students in elementary and high schools, this study was able to attach accurate percentages to students who felt like they could not attend school, who felt that they got bullied daily, etc. The article discusses 6 pedagogic strategies that can help integrate LGBT topics into curricula, and how to control student/professor disagreement on the subject. Lastly, Dinkins adds to my information used for this research by using a particular case study. Dinkins and Englert examine how a particular novel with a gay character is studied within a middle

school environment. LGBTQ literature being incorporated within the classroom creates a breeding ground of either acceptance or incredible opposition. As the teacher stood as a representative for what is accepted within the classroom, the students followed her lead and focused on the more heteronormative aspects of book. Generally, middle school students who identified other than heterosexual were met with negative feedback. In the end, the data gathered evidence that supported the idea that administrators and instructors often create an environment where non-heteronormative ideals are not able to be expressed without negativity.

The combination of these three sources show the results of other successful research, and guided me in collecting my information in the age group.

Heteronormativity in Tertiary School

By collecting information for Tertiary School, I was able to have solid information for the years before as well as after middle school. By doing this, I am able to perhaps see the effect of curricula and/or the classroom environment's effect on the students' mindset and attitude. I used the works of *EXPERIENCES OF CHALLENGING HETERONORMATIVITY IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHER TRAINING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL: A REFLECTIVE CRITICAL INCIDENT APPROACH* (Nzimande, N. 2017) and *Heteronormativity in the University Classroom: Novelty Attachment and Content Substitution among Gay-friendly Students* (Ripley, M. et al 2012).

Nzimande contended that the perpetuation of heteronormativity within tertiary education in South Africa have far reaching effects on the LGBT community. The author uses critical incidents to tap into her personal experiences with heteronormativity through her practices. By

doing this, she was able to use her evidence to support the fact that heteronormativity still prevails in tertiary education. In addition, she claims that inclusive pedagogy has a huge influence on how accepted those of other sexualities will feel. In contrast, Ripley, Anderson, McCormack, and Rockett collaborate to describe the life of an openly gay instructor on campus. The authors contend that, while university instructors have a more accepting environment for coming out, they still experience homophobia – specifically during campus instructor examinations. Many teachers stay closeted and encourage heteronormative ways of life/ideals in order to gain more respect or merit. By combining observational data, interviews, and questionnaires, the authors realized that many of the students exhibited pro-gay attitudes. In addition, the students believed that the instructor used more homosexual than heterosexual examples during class, and the students believed that homosexual content was on purpose.

The purpose of using Nzimande’s study was to gain a worldly perspective on the issue, as to be well-rounded in my accumulation of information.

The Effect of Heteronormativity, and the Lack of Inclusivity

Lastly, the works chosen for this particular group of information included: *Questioning heteronormativity: using queer theory to inform research and practice within public mental health services* (Semp, D. 2011), and *Negotiating the Intersection of Racial Oppression and Heteronormativity* (Smith, L.C. et. al. 2015).

Semp contends that queer theory can be used in order to get a better view of the inclusivity of mental health institutions. Queer theory, in general, focuses on the acknowledgement that there are differences between sex, gender, and identity within individuals

who are not cissexual (people who identify as the sex they were assigned at birth). Semp discusses the strategies that can be used to minimize the discrimination of homosexuals who seek mental health help in such departments. He also mentions that positivist, individualizing and essentialist assumptions often prohibit the possible research that can be executed on LGBT individuals. Semp uses this as a basis for his argument that heteronormativity limits research in many ways. In addition, Smith's quantitative study looks at the stories of seven heterosexual individuals and how they respond to non-heteronormative situations and people. By using snowball and purposeful sampling, they chose people who already showed a positive disposition to the LGBT community. In addition, psycho-discursive methodology was implemented – meaning that the initial observation/experiment was much more complex. In general, the experiment aimed to help the human services field by promoting the interruption of heteronormativity.

Statement of the Problem

The extent of research in the field of psychology concerning the effects of heteronormativity is extensive – venturing through different methods of experimentation in order to find out how different cultures and age groups react to these ideals. However, there is a substantial gap in the present knowledge, and that is: the ways heteronormativity affects students in middle schools. The present information that has been accumulated by past researchers all follow a common pattern: how heteronormativity affects older and younger individuals, and those in position of power. Early adolescents are overlooked incredibly within this field of research. This set of research will also look at the curricula of an English and a Choir/Theatre classroom in order to get a better idea of how specific teachers are navigating heteronormativity. The main question that I decided to focus on was: To what extent is

heteronormativity promoted in the curricula of middle school institutions, and what effect does this have on the present students?

Hypothesis

Null hypothesis: There is little to no variation between the heterosexual lifestyle and the homosexual lifestyle being promoted in middle school environments. No effect is seen in the students.

Experimental hypothesis: There is a substantial difference between the heterosexual lifestyle and the homosexual lifestyle being promoted in middle school environments. The heteronormative ideals are promoted much more often. The effect seen in the students is classified as a repression of anything other than heteronormative norms.

Research Design

I conducted most of my research through the internet and my interviews, however, I also compared what I found to how it was when I attended middle school. It was imperative to see how society has changed, if any, in order to formulate how the information found could affect the school environment in a positive manner.

Over the course of two days, I attended a middle school in East Texas where I collected all of my information used for this research. I purposefully went through the hallways while classes were switching so that I could see interaction between students, as well as teachers. I interviewed a total of two teachers, a Language Arts teacher and a Choir/Theatre teacher. I took

several photos of their room, and asked them a series of questions that focused on gender inclusivity and the possible harassment of individuals who do not follow the heteronormative lifestyle (index fig 1). I proceeded to observe the campus between classes, and took a few notes on the characteristics and interpersonal relationships between the students and the teachers (index fig. 2). The qualitative research that was conducted within this experiment was valuable in the fact that it harbors incredible depth, and possibly could be applied to several other middle schools in the East Texas area.

Selection and subjects

I chose to look at the middle school population due to the fact that it is largely under-researched in the area of heteronormativity and the way students are treated due to this particular characteristic. Originally, it was ideal to survey the students, however the experiment's focus shifted to the teachers' perspective in order to gain insight on what the student are being taught, and to what extent the values and beliefs of the teachers leak into the curricula.

Data Analysis

The data I accumulated from my research was incredibly interesting, and completely shut down my original hypothesis. Between the two teachers that I interviewed at a middle school in East Texas, the consensus was that the curricula does encourage a heteronormative lifestyle, however, it is slowly working its way out of the school system and becoming more of a neutral environment. There were several posters that claimed "No hate" (index fig. 3), and many of the teachers there had more masculine, short hair-cuts. There was an agreement between the two

teachers I interviewed that there were more masculine girls than feminine boys, however, neither of them were bullied or seemed to not have a place in a group somewhere on campus.

For English, the assignments still included characters with expected gender roles. The class was currently reading a book called “Wonder”, which included a male lead and small female roles. The book had a series of scenes and lessons, but it still ended with the male lead having a girl to live the rest of his life with. This trope was seen in a few other of their books that they read that year, as well. However, there was a few poems that they read that had a non-heteronormative narrator, and the students (according to the teacher interviewed) did not seem to be effected by this at all. In fact, the teacher interviewed had an anecdote that involved a student asking them if they were bisexual. The teacher assigned the student a paper where they had to write about why it mattered at all. This little anecdote in and of itself provides insight to how accepting/how nonchalant the upcoming generation, and the teachers, are becoming/are.

In the Choir/Theatre department, the teacher claimed to see a lot of students who were not afraid to be who they are in her classroom. She claimed she did not know about the hallways or other classrooms, but when students were themselves, none of the other students cares. In Theatre, gender roles are generally disregarded. For example, the school was putting on the play “Willy Wonka”. With this play, the main character is a male boy named Charlie. The boy Charlie is being played by a girl this year, which came with immense support and happiness from all the classmates of the girl. In addition, music comes as a “language to all”, according to the teacher I interviewed. She said students rarely change the pronouns in a song to fit the heteronormative expectations of the individuals around them.

In between the two classes and my observations of the students as classes changed, the environment of secondary school (in East Texas), seems to be becoming a lot more accepting

and less focused on gender roles. With this generation going through so much physical change and mental change, it is incredible that the students are beginning to take on their own mindset, and begin to realize that what certain parents, and perhaps primary school teachers, have instilled in them could be different from what they actually want to think for themselves.

Ethical Issues and How to Improve Future Research

There were few ethical issues with my research due to the fact that I did extensive studying over the International Review Board and their policies for individual research. Originally, it was ideal to survey the students anonymously and see what they thought, themselves, about their school experience and how they are treated by their peers and teachers. However, surveying those under the age of 18 is prohibited, so I decided to interview the teachers instead and get a better picture of the curricula and what the students are expected to read/learn. An ethical dilemma that could have festered was my presence on campus. I was not the parent or sibling of anyone, so it was difficult trying to explain my research and what I was trying to compile for my study. However, because I was there for a short period of time over the stretch of two days, and my appearance was limited on campus, it was accepted and I did not affect any natural occurrences between students and/or teachers.

The research done in my study was solid for the East Texas area and classes that were not math/science based. If this were to be conducted again, it would be imperative that several other subjects be observed, and other teachers should be interviewed in order to gain a well-rounded perspective of the whole middle school environment. The study should be conducted in other

Southern, conservative states in order to see how the students are reacting to resistance of non-heteronormativity and if any changes are occurring in the school system concerning this.

The importance in answering, or at least finding evidence of the effect of heteronormativity in middle school classroom on a large scale, lies in the fact that if the exclusivity is proven or supported, there can be measures taken in order to be more inclusive, or at least less heteronormative. By doing this, the society can be more tolerable of different sexualities and different lifestyles, which can lower suicide and depression rates, along with mental health illness within the LGBT community. This creates a more harmonic, inclusive human condition. In terms of the body of knowledge, the information that is accumulated from this particular study will help create a more well-rounded perspective of the issues revolving around the set societal expectations. With the gap in knowledge being one of the most important human development stages (puberty), the knowledge will help future researchers create better experiments in order to broaden the scope of the results. The information from this study could be used to improve the policy of the education system, and aid it in becoming a more inclusive environment for all types of individuals.

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- I. Interview survey – figure 1
- II. Observations – figure 2
- III. Posters and Photos – figure 3

Gender Inclusivity Interview Questions

1. Years taught:
2. Grades taught:
3. Subject(s) Taught:
4. Gender:
5. Who leads the classroom discussions more, boys or girls? Examples?
6. Do girls tend to lean towards the stereotypical femininity that is expected of them? Are boys masculine? Examples, please.
7. Do the books/movies you may read/watch include the expected gender roles? Do they follow a heteronormative storyline (men saving women, women being only mothers, etc.)?
8. Have you seen bullying pertaining to the gender of an individual or their sexuality?
9. If you worked in subjects other than English, are there differences in the way boys and girls act toward each other? (Men being more dominant in a science or math classroom, etc.)
10. Do you see more masculine girls than feminine men? Or vice versa? Examples, please.
11. Do you think that the school curriculum encourages students to follow the heteronormative lifestyle? How?

Index Figure 2

Observations

- A girl with a more masculine persona – less makeup, hair cut short, in a group of guys
- Lots of separate, particular groups of students walking to and from class
- “No hate” poster
- More women teachers with boy-cut hairstyle
- More groups that included both boys and girls equally
- Speaking two different languages between groups (some Spanish, some English)
- More feminine décor around the school

Index Figure 3

Posters and Photos



"No Hate" poster seen in East hallway



Male classroom – femininely decorated