TROUBLING EDUCATION

Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy

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Theories and Practices of Antioppressive Education

In an attempt to address the myriad ways in which racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression play out in schools, educators and educational researchers have engaged in two types of projects: understanding the dynamics of oppression and suggesting ways to work against it. Whether working from feminist, critical, multicultural, queer, or other perspectives, they seem to agree that oppression is a dynamic in which certain ways of being (or, having certain identifications) are privileged in society while others are marginalized. They disagree, however, on the specific cause or nature of oppression, and on the curricula, pedagogies, and educational policies needed to bring about change. Collectively, they point to what I see as four ways to conceptualize and work against oppression: education for the Other, education about the Other, education that is critical of privileging and Othering, and education that changes students and society. Of course, many educators and researchers blend and modify these four approaches, including the thinkers I cite in each category, but I use this categorization to help me highlight the primary strands of thought in this field of study.

In this chapter, I examine each approach in terms of its conceptualiza-
tion of oppression, its implications for bringing about change, and its strengths and weaknesses. I argue that although educators have come a long way in detailing approaches that address different forms and different aspects of oppression, they need to make more use of feminist and queer readings of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis in order to address ways that oppression plays out differently in different situations. In addition to bringing poststructuralist and psychoanalytic perspectives into the first three approaches, I devote significant attention to them in the fourth approach, where I also explore their implications for instruction in the "core" disciplines of K–12 schools (social studies, English, mathematics, and science). Broadening the ways we conceptualize the dynamics of oppression, the processes of teaching and learning, and even the purposes of schooling is necessary when working against the many forms of oppression that play out in the lives of students. Doing so requires not only using an amalgam of these approaches (which many educators already do), but also "looking beyond" the field to explore the possibilities of theories that remain marginalized in educational research.

Before turning to my analysis, I should explain some of my terminology. I use the term Other to refer to those groups that are traditionally marginalized, denigrated, or violated (i.e., Othered) in society, including students of color, students from under- or unemployed families, students who are female, or male but not stereotypically "masculine," and students who are or are perceived to be queer. They are often defined in opposition to groups traditionally favored, normalized, or privileged in society, and as such, are defined as other than the idealized norm. Although my analysis focuses on only four forms of oppression, I believe it extends to other forms of oppression and to other traditionally marginalized groups, such as students with disabilities, students with limited or no English-language proficiency, and students from non-Christian religious backgrounds. Future research should further explore these connections.

Education for the Other

What is Oppression?

The first approach to addressing oppression focuses on improving the experiences of students who are Othered or in some way oppressed in and by mainstream society. Researchers taking this approach have conceptualized oppression in schools in two ways. First, schools are spaces where the Other is treated in harmful ways. Sometimes the harm results from actions by peers or even by teachers and staff. For example, numerous researchers have documented the discrimination, harassment, physical and verbal violence, exclusion, and isolation experienced by female students (Kenway & Willis, 1998), by queer students or students perceived to be queer (P. Gibson, 1989), and by students of color, such as Asian American students (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992). Sometimes, however, the harm results from inaction by educators, administrators, and politicians. For example, a number of researchers have documented the shocking, shameful, and substandard conditions, such as insufficient instructional resources and unsafe buildings and classrooms, of many urban schools serving economically poorer students and students of color (Kozol, 1991), while others have pointed to the lack of attention female students receive by teachers who simultaneously give too much of their attention to disruptive male students (Orenstein, 1994). The first way, then, that researchers have illustrated oppression is by pointing to the recognizably harmful ways in which only certain students are treated in and by schools—in other words, to the external ways in which Otherness is marginalized.

Oppression, however, is not always easy to recognize. The second way that researchers have conceptualized oppression is by looking at assumptions about and expectations for the Other—especially those held by educators—that influence how the Other is treated. In particular, they look at the internal ways of thinking, feeling, and valuing that justify, prompt, and get played out (and even reinforced) in the harmful treatment of the Other. Sometimes these dispositions, both conscious and unconscious, are about who the Other is, as is the case with racial and ethnic prejudices and stereotypes that influence how teachers treat their students of color (L. S. Miller, 1995), or sexist ideologies and stereotypes that influence how teachers differently treat their female and male students and how students treat one another (Kenway & Willis, 1998; Mac an Ohaill, 1994). Sometimes these dispositions are about who the Other should be, as is the case with assimilationist beliefs that students of color should conform to the mainstream culture and become more like middle-class White Americans (L. S. Miller, 1995). And sometimes these dispositions are about who the privileged must be in order not to be the Other, as is the case with sexist and heterosexist
assertions that all boys should exhibit hegemonic masculinity in order to be “real” men (Askew & Ross, 1988).

Students have responded in a variety of ways to these oppressive treatments and dispositions. Some have “overcompensated” by hyperperforming in academic, extracurricular, and social activities (Friend, 1993); some have accommodated enough to succeed academically but have maintained a sense of connection to their ethnic culture and community (M. Gibson, 1988); some have resisted the dominant values and norms of school and society (Fordham, 1996; Willis, 1977); some have experienced an array of “hidden injuries,” such as the psychological harm of internalizing or even resisting stereotypes (Osajima, 1993); and some have endured depression and turned violence onto themselves by abusing drugs, starving and scarring their bodies, and even attempting or committing suicide (Orenstein, 1994; Uribe & Harbeck, 1992). Thus, to the onlooker, some of these students “succeed” in school, whereas others are marginalized, fail, and drop out, while still others exhibit no signs that distinguish them from the majority of the student body. But despite the apparent differences between those students who “succeed” and those who “fail” or simply fail to distinguish themselves, all experience oppression.

Bringing About Change

Researchers applying this first approach to antioppressive education have suggested two ways in which to address oppression. Responding to the notion that schools are “harmful spaces,” many researchers have argued that schools need to be and to provide helpful spaces for all students, especially for those students targeted by the forms of oppression described above. These “spaces” have been conceptualized on two levels. On one level, the entire school needs to be a space that is for students, and in particular, that welcomes, educates, and addresses the needs of the Other. For example, the school needs to be a safe space where the Other will not be harmed verbally, physically, institutionally, or culturally (Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992). The school needs to be an affirming space where Otherness is embraced, where normalcy (cultural or sexual) is not presumed, where students will have an audience for their Othered voices, and where the Other will have role models (Asante, 1991; Malinowitz, 1995). The school also needs to be a financially and materially sound space where buildings are safe, instruc-

fional materials are available, and programs and personnel are sufficiently funded.

On another level, the school needs to provide separate spaces where students who face different forms of oppression can go for help, support, advocacy, resources, and so forth. For example, the school needs to provide therapeutic spaces where harmed students can go in order to work through their trauma, such as that resulting from harassment or assault; to receive the affirmation provided by support groups; and to come to know and accept who they are by learning about their differences (Crystal, 1989; Reynolds & Koski, 1995). The school also needs to provide supportive spaces where the Other can receive advocacy, such as that provided by teachers willing to serve on committees that address sexual discrimination and harassment and to signify their advocacy by, for instance, putting pink triangles on their classroom doors (Kenway & Willis, 1998). Student alliances that engage in political action, such as gay-straight alliances (Woog, 1995) and Asian American student organizations (S. J. Lee, 1996), should also occupy such spaces. Finally, the school needs empowering spaces where the Other can find resources and tools to challenge oppression themselves, such as informational pamphlets by various organizations, a wide variety of literature in libraries and resource rooms (see, for example, the lists of queer resources in Besner & Spungin, 1995, Committee on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues, 1997; Unks, 1995b). Many have even argued that schools should be, or at least provide, learning spaces exclusively for the Other, such as single-sex schools or classrooms (Salomone, 1997).

In response to the harmful dispositions of teachers, researchers have argued that educators need to acknowledge the diversity among their students, as well as embrace these differences and treat their students as raced, gendered, sexual, and classed individuals. For example, researchers suggest that rather than assume that students of color are intellectually inferior to White American students or culturally deficient, educators could incorporate the students’ home cultures into their classrooms and pedagogies, teaching in a “culturally sensitive” or “culturally relevant” way (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Philips, 1983; Sheets, 1995; Vagt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1993) or even teaching students about the “culture of power” so that they will know what it takes to succeed in mainstream schools and society (Delpit, 1988). Rather than employ traditional and, as many have argued, masculinist pedagogies that tend to benefit boys and marginalize girls (as in teacher-cen-
tered lectures or competitive debates where teaching/learning is rational, abstract, and detached from personal experience), educators could teach in ways that are equitable (American Association of University Women, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994), are traditionally “feminine”—such as by personally “connecting” and constructing knowledge with their students (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986)—or are sensitive to the differences between how boys and girls think and evaluate (Gilligan, 1982). Furthermore, educators could teach in a way that challenges the sexism—and concomitant heterosexism (Epstein, 1997)—prevailing among boys (Connell, 1997) and young men (Sands, 1990).

Concerning queer studies, rather than assume that all students are heterosexual or sexually “innocent”—which is not to say that they are asexual, but rather, that their heterosexuality is unstable (Watney, 1991)—and for that matter, that students can, should, or do leave their sexuality outside of school, educators could acknowledge and address the fact that students do bring sexuality into schools for a variety of reasons, such as to resist norms (Walkerdine, 1990) and to denigrate Others (Epstein & Johnson, 1998), and that students are not all heterosexual (some are queer, some are questioning). Finally, rather than assume that a student’s class background or community has no bearing on how he engages with schooling, educators could acknowledge the realities of day-to-day life that can hinder one’s ability to learn—as J. Alleyne Johnson (1997) did when she addressed the death of a classmate in an inner-city school—and could draw from the student’s own knowledge, experiences, and outlooks, as Paul Sylvester (1997) did when he transformed his classroom of predominantly working-class students of color into a “minisociety” in which students ran their own businesses.

In short, these studies urge educators not to ignore the differences in their students’ identities, and not to assume that their students are “normal” (and expect them to have normative, privileged identities) or neutral, in other words, without race, sex, and so forth (which is often read as “normal” anyway). Rather, educators could work to learn about, acknowledge, and affirm differences and tailor their teaching to the specifics of their student population.

Strengths and Weaknesses

The strength of this approach is that it calls on educators to recognize that there is great diversity among the student population, and, more importantly, that the majority of students—namely, all those who are not White American, male, hegemonically masculine, heterosexual, and middle-class or wealthy—are marginalized and harmed by various forms of oppression in schools. Educators have a responsibility to make schools into places that are for, and that attempt to teach, all their students. To fail to work against the various forms of oppression is to be complicit with them.

However, educators cannot use only this approach, as it has at least three limitations. First, by focusing on individual prejudice, cultural difference, and the interpersonal discriminatory treatment of the Other, educators fail to attend to other causes of oppression as well as other signs of oppression (McCarthy, 1993). Oppression consists not only of the marginalizing of the Other; it also consists of the privileging of the “normal.” By focusing on the negative experiences of the Other this approach implies that the Other is the problem: without the Other, schools would not be oppressing anyone. Furthermore, this approach has little to say to schools without populations of traditionally marginalized groups of students (such as schools with White American, middle-class enrollments with no gender disparities in grades and no “out” queer students). Yet, as the remaining approaches will soon reveal, since the dynamics of oppression are not confined to the ways in which certain students are treated by educators and other students, disrupting oppression requires more than preventing harmful interpersonal interactions.

Second, in order to teach for the Other, educators need to define the Other, but the process of doing so is both difficult and problematic. After all, identities and characteristics of groups are difficult to define, since the boundaries of groups are constantly shifting and contested, which means that any attempt to describe a group can simultaneously function to prescribe what it means to belong to that group. For example, safe spaces, supportive programs, and other resources often seem to target only a portion of a particular group, raising the question, Who is the Other that these resources are for? If these resources target homophobia, are they only for students who identify as gay, lesbian, and bisexual, and perhaps those who are questioning their identities as well? What about students harassed because they are perceived to be gay/lesbian/bisexual based on their gender expression, or children of gay/lesbian/bisexual parents? They are all harmed by homophobia, and they all deserve support, but one could argue that they need different kinds of support. Similarly, pedagogies seem to
target only subpopulations of a particular group, raising the question, what does it mean to tailor a pedagogy to a particular group? Does teaching in traditionally “feminine” ways reinforce the binaries of masculine/male and feminine/female? Does empowering girls to enter nontraditional fields challenge gender inequities even while reinforcing gender binaries? What about people who do not fit the normative categories of “boy” and “girl” (Bornstein, 1994; Chase, 1998)? A pedagogy tailored to address, in this case, gender inequities is not necessarily able simultaneously to address ways that the gender categories themselves are oppressive. In fact, pedagogies and resources that target a particular group or identity often fail to address students who are marginalized on the basis of more than one identity, such as multicultural curricula and resource centers that challenge racism but silence queer sexualities.

The situated nature of oppression (whereby oppression plays out differently for different people in different contexts) and the multiple and intersecting identities of students make difficult any antioppressive effort that revolves around only one identity and only one form of oppression. Perhaps what is needed, then, are efforts that explicitly attempt to address multiple oppressions and multiple identities, and that keep goals and boundaries fluid and situated. In other words, what is produced or practiced as a safe space, a supportive program, a feminist pedagogy, or a culturally relevant pedagogy cannot be a strategy that claims to be the solution for all people at all times, but is rather a product or practice that is constantly being contested and redefined. Rather than search for a strategy that works, I urge educators to address the articulated and known needs and individuality of the students, while constantly looking to the margins to find students who are being missed and needs that have yet to be articulated. Educators could create safe spaces based on what they see is needed right now, but constantly re-create the spaces by asking. Whom does this space harm or exclude? They could create supportive programs, but constantly re-create the programs by asking. What practices does this program foreclose and make unthinkable? They could engage in equitable and relevant pedagogies, but constantly rethink their pedagogies by asking. Whom does this pedagogy miss or silence? Without constantly complicating the very definition of the Other, an education for the Other will not be able to address the ways it always and already misses some Others.

A third weakness of this approach is its assumption that educators can accurately assess the needs of their students, especially their Othered students. As I will later argue, teaching involves a great degree of unknowability. Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997), for example, points out that there is always a “space between” the teacher/teaching and learner/learning, between, for instance, who the teacher thinks the students are and who they actually are, or between what the teacher teaches and what the students learn. What does it mean, then, to give students what they need if we acknowledge that we cannot know what they need and whether our efforts are received by students in the ways that we want them to be received? This is not to say that educators should not try to teach, but that the very notion of what it means to teach needs to change. I will discuss this factor of unknowability when I turn to the fourth approach to working against oppression. For now, my point is that the first approach is necessary to work against the harmful effects of oppression, but in helping only the Other (and in presuming to know the Other), it alone is not enough.

Education about the Other

What is Oppression?

Turning from interpersonal interactions to the school curriculum, some researchers have attempted to work against oppression by focusing on what all students—privileged and marginalized—know and should know about the Other. Given that knowledge can lead to oppressive as well as antioppressive actions (as described above), and given that a primary goal of schooling is to teach and learn more knowledge, these researchers suggest that antioppressive knowledge is central to challenging oppressions in school.

Researchers have pointed to two kinds of oppressive knowledges. The first kind of knowledge is the knowledge about (only) what society defines as “normal” (the way that things generally are) as well as what is normative (the way that things ought to be). In this case, Otherness is known only by inference, often in contrast to the norm. Such partial (i.e., incomplete) knowledge often leads to misconceptions. For example, learning that White New England settlers and their descendants are the “authentic” Americans implies that people of color are not real Americans (see Giroux, 1997, for a discussion of Whiteness and racial “coding”). Learning that normal and
SAM: We don’t teach our students to think. Our public schools don’t do that. We don’t give our students a chance to problem-solve and think for themselves.

KEVIN: What do you think we’re doing in public schools instead?

SAM: We’re asking everybody to color within the lines. We want them to reach standards. That’s the whole thing right now is, “How can we get everyone up to a certain standard?” Well, the only way to do that is to have everything extremely curriculum based, where it’s exposure-recognition-recall type of model. And then only the very high functioning will be allowed to go on and problem solve. Because if you look at our AP classes in high school, actually some of them are not as hard as your regular classes because the student is allowed to do more independent thinking instead of, “you must learn exactly what I’m teaching you, and give it back to me.”

KEVIN: Can you talk more about how learning involves crisis and emotion, based on your experiences?

SAM: [pause] I think that—boy—a lot of things. When you suddenly opened up this whole new way of thinking to a student, they don’t have any place to go with it.

KEVIN: What do you mean by that?

SAM: Well, if you brought up a lot of emotional feelings by talking about stereotypes and some of the things we were talking about—mistreatment—how would that student in the grade school, secondary type of school—how would they deal with that? We divide school up into these fifty-minute slots, each one is for a different subject, and you’re faced with twenty-some students, and who do they continue that crying or confusion with? When can they connect? I mean it goes back to connecting with somebody. Because how would you then come back? You know, it takes a while. This stuff has to sink in. When we present workshops, the participants usually leave kind of like this [Sam’s face expresses a sense of being overwhelmed]. And they need to go home and think and be able to reconnect. You know, we often say we have to do some kind of follow-up because otherwise people will just be blown away, and we have to bring them back, and let them go through it. So I’m thinking that’s something that’s definitely lacking in education. It’s like we don’t have time for the process, the natural process to occur. And the questioning. We also don’t—I’m probably going off in the wrong way—but I’m thinking we don’t allow students to question, to ask questions. We don’t even teach students how to ask questions, or to question. Because that’s not part of our public schools, it’s not what we’ve done. So when you do this, they can’t have time to question. And that’s also coming back to, “Am I free to ask this, teaching some of these deeper questions, to understand?” And I think that can become a crisis. And I think sometimes, you know, just from talking to other teachers who bring up really different—quote—“subjects”? I often hear that kids just shut down, they would not discuss this. And that was it. They would then avoid that teacher. Other students would be, you know, miraculously changed and want more. And he really probing. I mean how many students can go home and talk to their families about it? I mean that’s a whole other thing that we’re not talking about. And I think that’s really missing.

KEVIN: What do you think the solution could be?

SAM: Well, a lot of schools are talking about the block system, which would allow more time for discourse. Because it would be fewer classes and longer times to be together. And I think teachers are like, “Oh my God, what would I think of to do all that time?” But maybe there would be more discussion. I mean we still use the lecture format in schools. And I think also having a chance to share with your peers, you know, more small group opportunities, or to do projects together. I was just thinking of this thing that just happened. There’s a student in my school who’s your typical upper-middle-class, flawless young woman, you know, just pretty and sweet and popular and big house and the perfect family type of thing. And she came to me because another teacher said, “Go to [Sam],” because she needed her community service project and I can usually think of stuff for kids, even though I don’t know the kids. So I got her involved in this. I had been wanting to do this project, maybe I told you about it, for the Jamaican school that I had visited in Spring Break. I went to a school.

KEVIN: Oh, right.
SAM: And I decided that, since they have absolutely nothing, that would be a project that I could do with my friends, and just collect school supplies and books and help them start a school library. So I was like, okay, I’ll just throw this out to you, you know—[makes a high-pitched squeal]—type of kid. And, she really took it to her and I think part of it, now that I’m seeing the whole picture, because I met her mom and I’ve talked to her dad and I’ve gone to her house, I realized that Mom kind of jumped on to the bandwagon and channeled her and got ideas about how to make this project really big. Dad got involved, he’s an exec at [a clothing company], he asked [the company] to pay for all the shipping for all the stuff and they said yes. Dad’s been pulled in. Mom turns out to be a freelance journalist. She wants to do a story about it. She’s encouraging her daughter, you know. "This is an opportunity." The daughter, when we were together, sorting through stuff, I showed her all the pictures of the kids and you know, it started. "Oh my God! Jamaica’s more than these all-inclusive resorts! These are kids." She’d ask me these questions, she’d pick up something that we’d collected, "Do you think that they could use this? Would they be interested in this?" And she was starting to move to a poor, you know, very poor, poor community. The kids have nothing, it’s so far removed from her life. How would she ever have a chance to know what that was like? But she was starting to figure it out. And it’s really helped me make a connection because I have a tendency, as you noted in there before that, okay, the White kids, the middle-class kids, you know, you kind of do them a disservice by using them as like, "Well, I don’t have to reach out to them, they got it."
Which is so wrong.

KEVIN: Before, you said some students resist learning about these kinds of things. How do you think we can overcome that? What has been helpful for you?

SAM: I think it’s trust. I think it’s trusting that teacher. Students get angry when you tell them something about their culture, about their family, or about how people relate to others. It’s so threatening if you point out that that’s very racist or that’s hurtful. And then they’re just like, Oh my God, that’s so scary, you know, and so I’m just going to be mad, I’m just going to be mad. But if you’ve got that trust and that basic relationship, they’re going to come back. And you know, it may not happen right away. They may be really angry. And I guess I have this ideal situation because I’m with my kids for four years, and I see them grow. And, with the boys, it’s usually junior year that they really start to change. And they’ll come back and they’ll bring up something that we talked about maybe freshman year, something I brought up. But then they’re able to see it. Or then they’ve separated it. Another thing I see—oh my God, more with boys than with girls—they start to separate and they start to get their own values away from Mom and Dad. And they’ll come back to me and say, "my dad is such a racist, I could never feel the way he does, and now I’m finally able to talk about it and realize I’m going this way." And you know, and it’s so wonderful, and I’m like, "well, that’s what school’s supposed to be about. School’s supposed to help you become a person, not just echo what your parents want us to teach."
And you know, that’s what I always say to my students: You’re going to be exposed to all this stuff and a lot of it is going to be scary because it’s going to be different than what you hear at home at the dinner table. Then you’ve got to take it on, and decide what you want to keep and what you want to throw away. I’m not telling you you have to believe in the theory of evolution, but you’ve got to at least know about, know it’s there, then you’ve got to sit down and decide. And that is so scary for kids. Especially for low-functioning or middle-functioning, you know? But I do think trust, trust in that teacher, that. Well, they’re a good person or they care about me, so she can’t be, you know, misleading me. I may not accept everything or I may not do everything she wants, but I know she’s a good person, and I trust her. Kids don’t trust adults. You know, basically they hate a lot of teachers because they screw them over all the time with the grading system and different ways that they expect them to live up to norms.

KEVIN: When you said someone came back to you as a junior, it made me think. Sometimes we have to wait three years. That’s a long time!

SAM: I know. Isn’t it amazing? But I’ve noticed that with my own children. If they have an incredible experience, they may not talk about it, and then all of a sudden one day they’re like, "You know, when I did this, or climbed this mountain, or this happened?" And I’m like, "I can’t believe, that was six months ago and you’re just telling me?" But it’s the process time.

KEVIN: Maybe it’s how they revisit it in their own minds.

SAM: Yeah. And so how do we allow for that in schools? We really don’t.