USING FORUM THEATRE TO CHALLENGE HETEROSEXISM AND HETERNORMATIVITY IN A SOUTH AFRICA SCHOOL

Dennis Francis
University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

South Africa has extraordinarily progressive legislation that technically makes discrimination on sexuality grounds impossible. The social realities are not so encouraging and research in education shows how schools promote compulsory heterosexuality and that homosexuality is to be hidden and kept separate from teaching, learning and daily school life. In fact, a school in Bloemfontein, the Creare Training Centre, indicated in its prospectus that it assists homosexual with changing their sexual orientation and that homosexuals will not be allowed to enroll in the school unless they are willing to embrace heterosexuality.

In this paper, I explore whether Forum Theatre (FT) sessions, based on the theories of Boal, are a sufficient enough construct to challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity. FT, a participatory improvised theatre form, raises consciousness, enables debate and critical reflection, and encourages a democratic form of knowledge production that engages the audience in their own learning and unlearning. Using FT, I started a dialogue with Grade 11 learners at a co-educational school in Bloemfontein, to establish what they felt about the Creare Training Centre’s stance on lesbian and gay learners. More specifically, I used FT as a platform to understand how 15- to 18-year-old learners experience and respond to heterosexism and heteronormativity. The learners unanimously mentioned how outraged and appalled they were at the article and they were very critical on the school’s position. In asking the question, I positioned learners as knowers who had views and opinions on the issue of heterosexism and heteronormativity. Using the students’ initial attack on the school’s heterosexist position, I engaged them in FT, to raise consciousness about heterosexism and to provide opportunities to try out action plans to challenge heterosexism and heteronormativity at their school and beyond.

Data collected for this article included videotapes of the performances, discussions, and field notes. The FT scenes and subsequent discussions suggest that young people bemoan heterosexism and heteronormativity in their school and demonstrate a commitment to challenge extreme examples of prejudice and behaviour by their teachers and peers, yet ignore or shy away from everyday examples of heteronormativity, heterosexual exclusions and privilege. I argue that a participatory process, such as FT, can be a useful construct to challenge heterosexism, but it is not in itself liberatory, as the issues of socialisation, privilege, and context cannot be bypassed simply through ‘participation’. Although the research, on which this paper is based, focuses on anti-heterosexism work, the implications for pedagogy are applicable to a wider range of anti oppressive teaching.