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Abstract

The conflations of sex and gender, and then gender and sexual identity in representation becomes problematic in a context where homophobic discourses and violence still persist, despite South Africa’s progressive constitution. Therefore, this study focuses on the implications of the conflations between sex, gender and sexuality for education.

Using literature on theories of power, sex, gender and sexuality, as well as critical literacy, I have designed a critically aware educational workbook that confronts issues of sex, gender and sexuality. Because no text is neutral, this workbook and the process of its production are critically reflected upon and scrutinised in order to understand how critically aware educational materials can be produced. The workbook is then implemented in a critical literacy course for pre-service student teachers at a university in Johannesburg. In these lectures, the workbook is used to deconstruct patriarchal and heteronormative order in the attempt to understand how effective the workbook is, and the responses that participating students give in relation to texts and activities in class. These responses are recorded through field notes and notebooks, wherein students complete in-class activities, and have revealed the complexities involved in reimagining sex, gender and sexuality as socially loaded concepts and its impact on language use in the classroom. Finally, because critical literacy advocates (re)design practice, students are given a task to design their own educational materials. These are then critically analysed in order to consider how students’ design trends and ‘evaluations’ of the course show their changing understandings of sex, gender, sexuality and the conflations between them, or how they remain the same.

Throughout this thesis, I argue the need for critical literacy in education, across learning areas and grades. Specifically, I argue for a critical literacy that is unafraid to deal with controversial issues and difficult conversations, as well as a practice that uses subversive texts and diversity as resources for teaching and learning.
It has taken me two years to complete this thesis. Late nights in library booths, surrounded by the smell of books and the sounds of keyboard clicks. Early morning discussion with colleagues and friends. Story-time in front of a muted television. Daydreams between conversations.

I owe thanks to my family who has supported me throughout my career development, as well as my friends who never saw me, but understood, when I disappeared for weeks on end. I owe thanks to my work colleagues who motivated me to study and study more, question and question further, learn and then re-learn. I owe thanks to my supervisor who found the right ways to direct me, mentor me, and encourage me. And, I owe thanks, and love, to my partner who sat with me, endured stories good and not-so-good, battled ideas and interpretations, and then continued to loved me anyway.

I owe thanks to the many people and things that have taught me to see, reminded me to be humble and showed me the complexity of meaning: from the students who keep pushing me to think, explain, and become more accessible, to the world in which I live that is so full of wonder.
I declare that this thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Applied Language and Literacy Education, at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

Navan Nadrajan Govender
0610055R
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