

Homophobia and heterosexuality

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The school curriculum producing heteronormalized subjects is rooted in the sex/gender model, in Christian moral principles, in medical criteria about sexuality and in the criminalisation of any subjects who do not coincide with the heterosexual common sense.

Both the heterosexual system and the oppression of whoever does not coincide with it are thus preserved.

This school curriculum synthesises the national identity and replicates the cultural elements legitimised by it. This synthesis does not embrace sexual diversity at all. Therefore, the school curriculum becomes a tool that replicates the inferior social placement of women, so as of lesbian, trans, gays, bisexual individuals. This structure – fixing the qualities that connote 'to be a woman', to be a man'– is essentially grounded on the reproduction of the cultural judeo-christians matrixes, and on pedagogical rituals of masculinisation or feminisation , both at the level of explicit and hidden curricula.

How are the scenarios supporting the inferior social condition attributed to sexual diversity, and how can they be modified? Lesbian and bisexual individuals of the LTGBI Community have tackled these questions. Their answers –in the educational domain– have shaped some of the actions and reflections hereafter described.

Discrimination and school in LAC

According to the ILGALAC report "Lesbophobia, Transphobia, Homophobia, Biphobia in LAC", even though there is some progress in the human rights area, there are still countries where homosexuality is criminalised. In Chile the age of consent for homosexuality and heterosexuality is different; thirteen out of fifteen states of the Caribbean Community punish with jail –even with life imprisonment– any sexual

practices between persons of the same sex; twenty-six countries do not have laws against discrimination – Perú issued in 2007 its Law for Equal Opportunities, but it does not cover sexual orientation. It must be highlighted that legal sanctions are often applied on the basis of moral codes and conventional standards, against the principle of objective legality, since these sanctions are being applied against acts which do not conflict with any legal values; it happens with Paragraph 373 in Chile, or with the Felony Codes existing in 10 Argentine provinces.

The school should prepare for the future, but paradoxically it lives in the past. This is confirmed by its reticence –strongly influenced by the conservative discourse– to tackle any issues related to sexuality, sexual rights and/or sexual diversity. It is worth noting that many countries of LAC include in their school curricula subjects as Religion.

Within the school, this situation stimulates bullying practices, addressed against lesbians, bisexual, trans, gay, intersex individuals. Teachers defending their rights can face dismissal; students risk to be expelled or "advised" to change school. These attacks increase drop-out rates.

Some organisations of ILGALAC have formed the GALELAC NETWORK with the aim of bringing transformations in this field. Since 2008 APROFA, DIVERSE COLOMBIA, ISIG, ABGLT, among others, have initiated a process aiming to increase coherence between the interventions being developed, and the needs, demands and educational challenges of sexual diversity.

In 2008, GALELAC performed a Quick Scan in 16 countries, applying it to civil representatives with expertise in the subject and accredited work in the field of education. These countries cover, among others, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, México, Nicaragua, Panamá, Perú, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Uruguay and Venezuela.

The results of this study –which account for the scenario education/sexual diversity– are described hereafter:

- In most of these countries, information about LTGBI issues is delivered through HIV/AIDS prevention programmes. Such information arrives from a citizenship perspective only in Brazil, through the programme *Brazil without homophobia*.
- Obsolete conceptions about sexuality and gender are caused by the absence of these issues in the curricular plans, by the lack of teaching training and by the obstacles raised by conservative groups.
- There is a scarcity of materials dealing with sexual orientation and gender identity. The few ones that exist end up forgotten in the teachers' cupboards, as a result of the overload imposed on pedagogical agendas.
- There are no experiences regarding permanent curricular inclusion of these issues in the study plans. Actual experiences regard isolated workshops, which have not reached continuity.
- Regarding educational practices, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation does indeed exist in schools, affecting both teachers and students; no policies are addressed to eradicate it, or to sanction it. Although positive signs are found in Chile –where the Commission for Evaluation and Suggestions regarding Sexual Education recommended that sexual orientation should not be an obstacle for obtaining a complete academic education– and in Buenos Aires –where schools have commemorated the Day Against Homophobia–, these signs remain just a show of good intentions.
- Obstacles are apparent at different levels: in the legal framework, in the design and implementation of public policies, in participation and decision-making mechanisms; in the development of methodologies and implementation strategies for approved programmes; in the power correlations with the church and the conservative classes; in social resistance to change; in the lack of resources in the educational sector due to neo-liberal policies that remove support to health and education; in the centralisation, causing significant differences between urban and rural areas; in the differences between private and public schools, or between religious and secular schools. It is necessary to say that although national Constitutions contain general provisions that might be interpreted against

discrimination, they are not translated into specific statutes, due to insufficient levels of democratic quality.

- Statutes concerning sexual and reproductive health, regulations about women, adolescent and children rights, the adolescent and the child, so as secular education, have a positive influence on the inclusion of these issues in school curricula. This speaks revealingly about the negative influence of the church.

In the wake of this initial inquiry, GALELAC has started a research & action process in Chile, Perú and Colombia, based on the design and implementation of the following general activities:

- Survey conducted on intermediate school students of the last three grades.
- In-depth interviews with teachers, parents and education experts, taking into account the position of the LTGBI organisations.
- Design and implementation of a Pilot Plan for a school, including activities and material for facilitating the incorporation of these issues to the curriculum of studies.
- LTGBI educational networks that aim to strengthen their capabilities.
- Political lobbying and search for resources in order to promote a widespread implementation of these experiences.

Education and sexual diversity in Chile

The Educational Reform, which implementation started in 1996, promotes respect for diversity as a fundamental principle, emphasizing the need to address it with a tolerant behaviour. Tolerance has a wide spectrum of meanings, going from “cultivating respect and consideration for [other] opinions or practices, even if they appear to be disgusting” till “Endurance, patient acceptance”, “Allow some activity which is not considered lawful, without expressly approving it”, “Respect of other people’s ideas, beliefs or practices when they are different or contrary to our own”. This linguistic deambulation announces that some existing identities are more valuable than others, and it anticipates political negotiations that will not change substantially the economic, social and political

inferiority to which this second group has been relegated, where its invisibility in the academic curriculum plays an important role.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that the principle of tolerance promoted by the Educational Reform has clearly aimed to diminishing the impacts of the exclusion of indigenous groups. The implementation of the Intercultural Bilingual Education Programme proves this point. However, some facts are breaking havoc on the life of indigenous women, such as the military occupation of the mapuche territory, the implementation of the antiterrorist law against natives, and the significant retreat of the mother tongue. They demonstrate that this Programme lacks effectiveness, that it is strengthening the prevailing monocultural.

These developments reveal how limited are the contents of the concept of interculturality. In “Normalisation of the teaching practices and its relationship with the Quality in Education Measurement System – SIMCE”¹, a research developed in five public schools of the metropolitan region, the following conclusions are reached: *“The standardisation of pedagogical practices resulting from the SIMCE perpetuates differences between genders. The SIMCE emphasises that some contents and learning experiences are more important than other: teachers allocate this pre-eminence to humanities/sciences, so as to arts/values/sports. Sexuality-related issues are allocated to the lower category, shielding the sex/gender model from criticism, and rendering invisible any issues pertaining to non-heterosexual sexual diversity (...)”*

The concept of gender equality aims to eradicate the inequality and the discriminatory practices between women and men². The “equal opportunity” approach purports to offer and to ensure fair opportunities to women and men, in such a way that both groups can develop and partake from the benefits of national development in an egalitarian way. Therefore, relation between men and women is a central issue in the gender approach adopted by the government, that ideally should be part of learning processes addressed to transversal development in schools. Both institutionalisation of gender and its placement on the educational scene –which is scarce due to the SIMCE’s influence– replicate codes

¹ Hernández Iris, Master’s Thesis in Education, University of Santiago, 2004.

that put women as political subjects in their centre. This centrality contributes to some credible steps toward the eradication of the inequality that women suffer. But it also contributes to making invisible the existence and specificities of lesbians, trans, bisexual and gays, and to shielding the processes of heteronormativism from criticism.

The gender approach develops a process of revindications, framed by the position occupied by women in the sex/gender model. This process reinforces the social structures, as a condition for accessing citizenship and belonging to it, strengthening the ideology of the equality policies. It is also a logic accepted by LTGB political groups. In the study “*Biases and knowledge about sexual orientation and gender identity in educational institutions of the metropolitan region*” of MOVILH, a research is carried out about –among other aspects– about behaviours of tolerance towards same-sex marriage and adoption. This situation can feed the ‘renounce to criticism’ attitude, hiding the violence which is characteristic of the structures of the heterosexuality, and specifically of the conjugal and familiar structures.

In this context, the educational experiences originating from feminism do not manage to construct a permanent dialogue, and they have approached sexual diversity from identity- and tolerance-related perspectives. This is clearly observed in activities like “Skin Change”³, a pedagogical proposal for the school curriculum –which is anyways pertinent–. In the area of formal education, no publicized interventions have been developed neither by lesbian feminist organisations, nor by trans organisations.

The abovementioned facts assigns sexual diversity to fixed categories that have facilitated the lesbian and gay passage through paths of integration which perpetuate the replication of binary models which obvious reference is capitalist heterosexuality.

In 2004, 68% of parents, 79% of women students and 81% of teachers expressed their disagreement with the closet situation of gays and lesbians. In 2008, in the metropolitan region, it is ascertained that 63% of students, 54% of mothers and 40% of teachers do not considered themselves prepared for tackling issues related to homosexuality and/or transexuality, even though a majority among them knows some lesbian, trans, bisexual,

² Ministerial Agenda for Gender Equality 2006-2010, www.semam.cl, 2006

gay, or intersex individual, so as cases of school bullying. So the studies have verified, among other things, that violence affects the population LTGBI, and that teachers are not prepared to tackle that discrimination.

Stigma and discrimination –colluding with a tolerance principle that makes exclusion productive through the institutionalisation of diversity–lead to the development of a limited “intercultural” approach, replicating a binary gender approach, whereas a human rights approach emphasized from education is missing. As a result of the pedagogical scenario that has been succinctly described and regulated by the SIMCE requests (together with the lack of citizen participation, with the non-legitimacy of the knowledge of those who are not heterosexual, and with the hegemonic approach toward value-related goals) interventions keep having a limited cultural relevance. In this way, non heterosexual identities remain in the same social and curricular placement that they always have.

Final words or considerations for action

I'll conclude with some indications that should be considered when developing educational work related to sexual diversity. They are born from an analysis of current reality and of the specific experiences that have intervened on this reality:

- There are similarities between the countries of LAC regarding Lestranshomobiphobia; they are grounded on designs that try to answer requests that emerge from international regulatory frameworks related to the exclusion of women and of indigenous groups. Should they expand their contents, these designs can strengthen the inclusion into school curricula of issues related to sexual diversity. On the one hand, the concept of Interculturality should aim to gain independence from a model that is not including sexual diversity and that is denying validity to cultural multiplicity. It is not necessary to detract importance from the oppression of indigenous groups; on the contrary, the goal is to deconstruct the hegemonic models which stimulate this oppression. On the other hand, gender policies must assume their character of cultural construction, in

³ Grau Olga, « Skin Change », Fundación La Morada, 1997

order to incorporate issues which limit the scope of their equality and equity approaches.

- The development of value-related learning processes becomes difficult, given the scarce delimitation of their implementation. This must be taken into account when trying to incorporate issues related to sexual diversity. A citizenship approach contributes to the development of aims and specific activities to this end.
- The implementation of Education Assessment Systems of Education can provide the opportunity to use them as a strategic ally. The key is to develop specific abilities through an appropriate approach to these issues – in such a way, these systems can become an ally of teachers who are always overloaded by this kind of demands.
- Interventions in this area make easier to build LGBTI protection groups, that are tolerated as a minority. This stimulates politically-acceptable processes which make still deeper the differences among individuals, replicating –may I insist on that– the undervaluation of the social and curricular positions where they are placed, always in a politically-acceptable way.
- Research must be carried out about how to intervene on reality in the most suitable and pertinent ways. These ways must give relevance to the participation of LTGBI professional, whose knowledge is not considered legitimate currently; and certainly also to the data obtained from this reality-oriented research. In this context it is significant to speak about *professionalization of activism*, related to the processes of educational training that will consolidate the knowledge that has been accumulated. The goal of this knowledge should be to generate a significant political intervention, concerning public policies, so as how they are translated into action at the educational centres. Difference and oppression can become productive through the voice of LTGBI people who have suffered it with as; this very voice can subvert them and transform them into a destabilizing force against the constructions defining some sexualities as normal, some as non-normal.

Finally, I shall emphasize that the presence of LTGBI voices –who have permanently kept circulating their knowledge– will facilitate cultural synergies, that will cause the

destabilisation of monocultural educational constructions and the deconstruction of the curricular constraints affecting education about sexuality and reproduction. This will facilitate the organization of a new scenario, more friendly towards interculturality and its fragmentary identity frameworks.

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