

MEDIA EDUCATION FOR ADDRESSING SEXUAL DIVERSITY IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Compulsory secondary education is a key stage in our affective-sexual development. The paper first describes the theoretical model on which our work is grounded, namely, inclusive education. We then present the case that audiovisual media play a key role as constructors of reality and in generating stereotypes of lesbian and bisexual women. The paper concludes with a proposal for didactic material aimed at secondary school students in compulsory education, which analyses the media discourse in the construction of stereotypes. This material aims to contribute to generating spaces for dialogue in the classroom based on respect, equity and social justice.

KEYWORDS

Sexual diversity, media education, inclusive education

1. INCLUSION AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION

The new education reality, framed in the context of the information and knowledge society, and following the third educational revolution (Esteve, 2003), is concerned not only with content, but also advocates social integration, values and the preparation of responsible, autonomous and participative citizens. There is now a growing idea that a new conception of schools is possible, in which the pedagogy of exclusion is replaced by a more inclusive quality education for all. Diversity is understood as being present in every corner of the school and as a factor that can enrich the relationships that form within it (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2001). Jiménez and Vila (1999) regard diversity as an inherent characteristic of human nature and as a potential way for improving and enriching social and cultural conditions and relationships between both individuals and social groups.

Echeita (2006) classifies three approaches to the concept of inclusive education: inclusive education as education for all, as participation and as value. The first one is based on a real need to respect differences, whether in gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, origin, capacity or culture. Differences between people are understood to be a natural enriching factor in all societies, and must therefore clearly be reflected in schools. Pupils must be treated with respect and equal opportunities must be guaranteed so that all can learn together (Moliner and Moliner, 2007). There are several authors working in this line. Dyson (2001) emphasizes how the development of inclusive schools – schools that are capable of educating all children – is not only a way of ensuring respect for the rights of disabled children so that they can access one

type of school or another; it also constitutes an essential strategy to guarantee that a wide range of groups have access to any form of schooling.

The second approach mentioned above, that is, inclusive education as participation, considers that the main focus of this perspective is on finding out whether students are educated, how this occurs and the extent to which they participate in educational processes. Schools should be a community that welcomes and takes into account all its pupils, and that fosters and encourages their participation in the life of the school. Learning, an essential outcome, should be maximized to the full for all pupils, and processes of transformation in schools based on the participation of all the community in the cultures, policies and practices of the school are regarded as essential (Booth and Ainscow, 2002). Experts working along these lines consider three variables that are relevant to the school life of all pupils: attendance, participation and performance. In each of these variables, inclusion tackles the essential task of identifying and, where necessary, removing the barriers that negatively interact with the personal or social conditions of certain pupils at certain times in different areas of school life by restricting attendance, participation and performance of these or other pupils in the school (Ainscow, Booth and Dyson, 1999). In a similar way, Slee (2001) considers that inclusive education is, simply put, ensuring that education is available for all. The job is to identify the barriers to access, participation and success.

Finally, inclusive education as value, understands inclusive education as an attitude, a system of values and beliefs, and not as simple combination of actions. Once schools adopt this attitude, it should condition the decisions and actions of all those involved. Inclusive schools highlight a feeling of belonging in the classroom and in the school, where everyone feels supported and accepted, and where they give support and are supported by their peers and other members of the school community, and at the same time their educational needs are satisfied (Arnaiz, 1996). The philosophy of inclusion is based on the value of diversity under the premises of equality and democracy. "An inclusive school is a place where everyone belongs, is accepted, supports, and is supported by his or her peers and other members of the school community in the course of having his or her educational needs met". Essential features of an inclusive school are a cohesive feeling of community, acceptance of differences and response to individual needs (Stainback and Stainback, 1990). It is therefore a better way of living. It is the opposite of segregation and apartheid. Inclusion determines where we live, are educated, work and play. It is about changing our hearts and values (Pearpoint and Forest, 1999).

Diversity is regarded as enriching interaction between individuals and between groups. We refer to *educating in diversity* in the sense of assuming difference as a value and the importance of teaching this value. It does not focus exclusively on *a priori* stigmatized groups that have become problematic; rather it advocates education for all, based on equality and the democratic principle of universal education, and considers diversity in all its forms as a positive and enriching factor in the social and political framework of striving for social justice (Lluch, 1995; López Melero, 1995 and 1995; Tenti, 2008).

Based on this perspective, our proposal focuses on addressing respect for sexual diversity in compulsory secondary education, with the aim of including everyone whatever their sexual orientation might be.

2. RESPECT FOR SEXUAL DIVERSITY: UNFINISHED BUSINESS FOR A WORLD WITH NO CLOSETS

Sexual orientation should not be a cause for any type of discrimination; everyone has the right to be treated with respect. Article 27 of the Spanish constitution states that the aim of education shall be to develop the human personality to the full with due respect for the democratic principles of coexistence and for basic rights and freedoms. One of the functions of education, therefore, is to promote equity and social justice by providing critical tools to end discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sex or sexual orientation.

One of the objectives of the education system is to help create a situation where everyone can enjoy the same rights and freedoms, which as explained above, is one of the basic principles of inclusive education. To this end, the education system has a duty to encourage respect for sexual diversity, as specified in the preamble to the Spanish Organic Law of Education (LOE), the aims of education include the full development of the personality and the affective capacities of pupils, the encouragement of respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, and for effective equality of opportunity for men and women, the recognition of affective-sexual diversity and critical evaluation of inequalities that allow sexist behavior to be overcome. These educational aims become essential in a context in which there is still discrimination and exclusion on the basis of sexual orientation. This exclusion is even more evident in the case of lesbians and bisexual women, since they are discriminated against on two fronts: as women, and as lesbians and bisexuals.

We are still a long way from equality. As teachers, we have the responsibility to promote respect for diversity, to strive against discrimination and towards the construction of fairer and more equal world for everyone. To this end, our proposal falls within education for respect for sexual diversity which, as well as cultural, moral and religious education, is covered in the subject of Education for Citizenship and Human Rights (Royal Decree 29 December 2006). Teaching resources need to be produced so that teachers can address this issue in the classroom, particularly in light of the scant material presently available. The FELGTB (Spanish National Federation of Lesbians, Gays, Transsexuals and Bisexuals) has denounced the fact that most textbooks for this subject do not cover even the most basic syllabus proposed by the Ministry of Education. This situation is also reflected at an international level, as confirmed in the work of Dessel (2010), who highlights the pressing need to address the issue in order to eliminate prejudices and improve the school environment and culture. Similarly, Jennings (2010) points to the low priority given to the subject of sexual orientation and diversity in a review of 142 teacher training programs in the USA.

To fill this gap, organizations such as the FELGTB, which for years has been drawing attention to these issues in the field of compulsory education, have designed teaching materials that make progress in this direction. Our research is inspired by these proposals and specifically concerns working through media education to deconstruct the stereotypes and social roles imposed by the mass media as 'normal'.

3. CREATING REALITIES THROUGH THE SCREEN

Embedded as we are in the information society (Castell, 2001), media space is growing at a dizzying pace and is increasingly encroaching on our personal and professional lives. The immediate consequence of this growth is the increased power of the media. As Aparici (1996) explains, media messages can be considered as mirrors of reality, as windows on the world or as constructors of reality. This study is based on the idea of the media as constructors of reality, on the influence of the media on people's education and socialization, on the construction of the collective imagination, and on value choices.

3.1. The role of stereotypes

The study of stereotypes in the media is a useful way of examining the connection between image and ideology. Stereotypes indicate what we regard as typical or characteristic of a group and provide concrete accessible examples of ideology in practice. When we examine media stereotypes of social groups such as women, the young, the old and ethnic groups, we are analyzing cultural customs that have significant political and social ramifications.

As noted above, media products are media constructions. Quin (1996) puts forward a series of questions to critically analyze their discourses and to reflect on:

Selection: Who and what will be shown? Which people and which events? How will these people and these events be presented? The answers to these questions are not exempt from prejudice.

Representativeness: to what extent are the images presented typical or representative of a group? Stereotypes are formed when a limited set of symbols is repeatedly represented as typical of the group.

Sender: When we see any image we should ask, who is speaking here? Who decides who speaks for whom? Is the image presented the one the group would have chosen to represent itself or was it chosen by others?

Receiver: What does the image represent to me? The viewer's interpretation is paramount here. Not everybody understands images in the same way. Our sex, race, culture, politics and life experience mean we see the world in different ways.

Stereotypes provide the dominant group with the justification to perpetuate its oppression and its power over minorities. The media are a useful tool with which to construct stereotypes of

minorities, by drawing a line between who is considered “normal” and who is excluded and left outside. These constructions have an impact on minority groups’ participation in the public space and end up affecting their empowerment and their civil rights.

4. LESBIANS AND BISEXUALS IN THE MEDIA. INVISIBLE = NON-EXISTENT

The LGTB community has traditionally been one of the groups the media industry has marginalized, not only through exclusion, but also through the use of stereotypical images to represent it, thereby generating prejudices and negative attitudes.

In these media constructions, lesbians and bisexual women have been doubly discriminated against because they belong to two minorities. In fact, until relatively recently the norm was to consider them as invisible. The media helped to create the notion of lesbians and bisexual women as non-existent in the collective imagination, and this invisibility perpetuated the discrimination against them and restricted their possibilities for participating and benefiting from their civil rights.

Throughout the history of cinema and television, lesbian and bisexual characters have been practically non-existent. Whenever a love story between two women was portrayed, it always ended in tragedy, depression, madness or perversion. In one of the few films that dealt with this issue, *The Children’s Hour* (1961), the character played by Audrey Hepburn says “there must be some place where we can go”, but apparently lesbians really did not have their own space. It was not until 1985 that the release of “*Desert Hearts*” portrayed the first full-length lesbian love story with a happy ending.

Lesbian and bisexual characters on television have been no less fortunate. In the USA, one of the largest international producers and exporters of audiovisual fiction, the first kiss between two female bisexual characters was not seen until 1996, in the series “*Relativity*”. And a further seven years went by before the first sex scene between two women was broadcast on open television, in 2003 in the series *Buffy*. This illustrates the extent to which the lesbian and bisexual community was excluded from media productions until very recently; an exclusion that has compromised their visibility, their self-esteem, their power and their aptitude for reclaiming their right to exist in the public space.

The representation of lesbians and bisexual women on television finally changed with the launch of the series *The L Word* in 2004, in which all the main characters were lesbians and bisexual women. However, although this was a major step forwards in terms of visibility and empowerment, it still left most of the lesbian and bisexual community out of the picture. The characters represented archetypes of beauty, on the whole white, successful and upper-middle class.

In the specific case of Spanish audiovisual productions, we find many similarities. If we focus our attention on the film productions, until the mid 70's the lesbian who was seen in Spanish

films was a caricature or a vampire. And though now we no longer associated lesbianism with a tragic life or a sick person, *there are still underrepresented and, therefore, little diversity*. (González de Garay, 2011: 222). As an important fact, according to Spanish cinema yearbook published by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport, the last decade over 1510 films, fiction and documentary productions entirely Spanish were produced. Of this total, only 25 have women involved in a homoerotic relationship and / or emotional (González de Garay, 2011). At the same time, in a study which analyzed the issues related to teen characters in the stories LGBT Spanish film, they only found one lesbian character and conclude that there are only few representations relating to lesbianism (Alpheus, González de Garay and Rosado, 2011).

In the case of Spanish television series, the picture improves visibility. In the middle ninety nineties we found the first fixed or recurring lesbian characters, and since then, growth has been almost exponential. Following González de Garay (2011), the first recurring characters appear in *Mar de dudas* (1995) and since then, the lesbian characters began to take prominence in fictions and grow in number and forms of representation. It is worth mentioning the case of *Siete Vidas* (1999-2006) for its longevity and *Hospital Central* (2000-2012) that was the first to introduce an ongoing relationship between two protagonists.

But, as González de Garay points, most influential and lesbian characters in fiction generally enjoy features that make them more assimilable by the contemporary Spanish society. We repeat the analysis made in the international series, the characters meet the Western canon of female beauty, are white, young, highly educated and upper middle class. In addition, they act according to patterns of behavior traditionally associated with heterosexuality, such as physical appearance, marriage, motherhood and monogamy. This way of characterizing them is a strategy of integration into heteronormative society.

Hence, it is not only visibility that matters, but also a representation of the community that can break with stereotypes and prejudices; a representation that can be multidimensional and diverse. The following section outlines a proposal that seeks to make this group visible in education and to offer students tools with which to reflect on this reality.

5. THE PROPOSAL: USING MEDIA EDUCATION TO PROMOTE RESPECT FOR SEXUAL DIVERSITY

The purpose of media education is to promote critical and active citizenship by denaturalizing the media and to achieve a new form of literacy that is able to embrace new media languages. It aims to teach how to select, evaluate and contextualize messages and to use the media critically to both produce and receive them.

This didactic material aims to bring together two essential lines of work in the emerging information and knowledge society: inclusive education and media education. Based on our analysis of the audiovisual media discourse on the construction of stereotypes of lesbians and bisexual women, we propose material comprising teaching units for working with secondary school pupils.

The pedagogical aims of the material are the following: To teach how to read media discourses critically; to produce alternative media messages; to encourage respect for sexual diversity and to provide tools to foster the inclusion of all pupils whatever their sexual orientation.

To meet these aims, the teaching units we propose offer teachers some basic information: data on how lesbians and bisexual women are dealt with in audiovisual media, various teaching methodologies and strategies for addressing these subjects in the classroom, specific standardized activities that can help to guide teachers and a proposal for evaluation.

One of the most relevant issues for approaching this subject concerns how stereotypes are constructed by the media. Studying stereotypes in the media is a useful way of rethinking the connection between image and ideology.

One example of an activity from the material could be one related with the social roles to: define and understand the concept of social roles; reflect on how social roles are constructed and what part the media plays in this construction; empower critical thinking vis-à-vis the production and consumption of media messages and promote a tolerant attitude towards lesbians.

The activity could consist in watch a clip from the television series *South of Nowhere*. After that, the teacher asks the pupils to answer the following questions individually: What do you think are the characters' positive and/or negative characteristics?; Do you think the characters are the stars of the series?; How do series influence the shaping of social roles and stereotypes?; Can they influence our ideas, attitudes and behavior?; Do lesbians get enough representation on television?; What repercussions does this have for lesbians? And Can visibility of lesbians in fiction help to increase the respect and acceptance of lesbians in society? These questions could open a class debate.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In an increasingly global, plural and multicultural social context, pupils must learn to relate to different people by participating in society appropriately and by learning to live together (López, Salmerón and Salmerón, 2010). Inclusive education is precisely the philosophy that contributes to building fairer societies and schools that ensure equal opportunities on the basis of respect for diversity. As we have noted, on many occasions this path towards equity is blocked by the creation of stereotypes fed by the audiovisual media. These stereotypes are even more striking when we refer to sexual diversity, and specifically lesbians and bisexual women. Television series and films have made them invisible and have created a prototype image of lesbians and bisexual women that rarely mirrors reality and that has a direct impact on their basic rights.

This situation alerts educational institutions and, backed by legislation, leads us to call for sexual diversity to be taken into account. We must not forget that our adolescents are and will continue to be potential consumers of these media. For this reason, this paper presents a

proposal for didactic material to work in secondary school classrooms where, by adopting a critical and participative focus, we hope to change this reality and contribute to constructing an inclusive citizenship. We consider that this proposal makes an interesting contribution with which teachers can address sexual diversity in their classrooms.

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