

The Experiences of a Transgender Student in an Initial English Language Teacher Education Program

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“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept and celebrate those differences”.

Audre Lorde (1994)

Abstract

This chapter is mainly focused on what is happening, in universities, with the teaching of gender to pre-service teachers, specifically transgender issues. Universities are hyper-regulated institutions which seem to practice an invisible censorship when it comes to the pursuit of knowledge and the choice of topics for teaching and research. The education of pre-service teachers in Colombia does not take gender diversity and especially transgender persons into account. This monolithic idea of what “The English teacher” is supposed to be is an evident problem in the education of teachers, a field which is “de-gendered”, in that it not only denies the existence of “genders” in the classroom but transgender “individuals” as well. This chapter discusses attitudes towards transgenderism in teaching, specifically in the education of pre-service teachers and draws on some previous studies of ELT teachers’ and students’ perceptions of transgenderism. It also looks at aspects of the experiences of transgender teachers and students which have been ignored

in previous studies and may throw light on how to deal with transphobia and strengthen the identity of pre-service transgender teachers.

Introduction

This chapter seeks to fill in the gaps in our understanding of the education of pre-service transgender teachers, since, as Butler (2002) notes, “some teachers close to media intellectuals remain deaf and blind to the views of students and minorities, exercising a power of interference in which the teacher ignores their capabilities” (p.43). In my view, this applies to trainee ELT teachers. The voices of those who are transgender persons have not been heard so far, in terms of who they are and who they will become professionally.

This chapter also highlights the diversity of future transgender English language teachers who study at a public university in Bogotá, Colombia, who are apparently invisible in a curriculum, marked by a de-gender ideology, which functions as a colonial mechanism to impose the dominant notions of “Being”, “Knowledge” and “Power” (Lugones, 2003).

The first section of this chapter discusses the rigidity of the education of future ELT teachers, due to the colonization of “BEING” by mechanisms which exclude gender affiliations which are not heteronormative. The meager studies of this problem mean that we need to think about restructuring orthodox teacher-training methods and break the canon of heteronormative universalism imposed by the colonial perspective (Anzaldúa, 1987).

The second section explains how discourses about (de)gendered identities in the education of English language teachers have become standardized in education programs. According to Meyer (2019), transformative pedagogy implies a break with the mistaken notion of “KNOWLEDGE” held by colonialism, which in an inherent way, has imposed “the normal / abnormal duality” and placed those subjects who do not fit into the definition of normal in a new category of non-normal. Once this polarization of reality is accepted and filters into the imaginaries of society, it follows that the category of heterosexual is defined as good, normal and natural, while the category of transgender is called bad, abnormal and denatured. The first enjoy benefits and a recognized status, while the second is stigmatized and sanctioned.

The third section highlights the diversity of gender and the denial of transgender identities. It shows how the “POWER” imposed by colonialism on gender (Castro-Gómez, 2002) has often been employed and is reflected in the binary opposition between the normality of hetero practices and the “abnormality” of transgender ones and the way colonialism favors the former. This perception needs to be challenged, not by reconstructing the subjects in the abnormal category but creating a new political imaginary in which people of diverse genders are fitted into “normal categories” (Wiegman, 2002).

This chapter intends to decipher what local knowledge says about the position of transgenderism in the education of ELT teachers, specifically, in the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas in Bogotá. It is written from a de-colonial perspective, which provides a theoretical foundation for its arguments. This perspective, in turn, rests on three main typologies of coloniality: the coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being, which are related to three problematic situations; “Pedagogical rigidity in the initial education of English language teachers”, “Standardized (de)gendered identities in the initial education of English language teachers” and “Gender diversity and the denial of transgender identities”.

Pedagogical Rigidity in the Initial Education of English Language Teachers

To get a better understanding of the misconceptions of the gendered being, which of course include transgendered beings, we turn to Curran, who asks us to avoid the natural evidence for identity categories and denaturalize the binary divisions of gender, like man / woman or homo / hetero imposed by different ideologies like colonialism. His study of how teachers conceive of and transmit their attitudes towards gender reveals the nature of pedagogical rigidity and concludes that young transsexual persons are a group at risk, with a series of special needs; transgenderism is regarded as a threat to their classmates; and a teacher’s acceptance of transgender students may encourage their classmates to be more tolerant (Curran, 2002, p.21).

Colonial mechanisms have especially influenced “Being” and the promotion of heteronormativity has been a feature of “pedagogical rigidity”. Given the meager studies of this issue, we need to think about re-structuring this

standardized pedagogy and question the dualistic canon of heteronormative universalism, in line with Britzman's suggestion that "Transformative pedagogy could elicit ethical reactions that would be able to overturn the arguments from origin and fundamentalism and deny submission" (2002, p.37).

In addition, Britzman (2002) notes the way in which normality becomes an imperceptible factor in the classroom, but that pedagogy itself can make students aware of its limitations (p.33). In other words, the challenge is to show the falsity of the idea of the other as a suspicious, dangerous, threatening or infectious subject. Elaborating on Britzman, Mérida (2002) says that: "the classroom can be transformed into a space that favors social change if the teacher combines an analysis of the authoritarian nature of orthodox ideas with a daily questioning of normative heterosexuality".

A transformative pedagogy which questions normality and attacks the dominant structures would allow for the opening up of alternative spaces of identification and the enjoyment of new desires (Britzman, 2002, p. 200). He also wonders about the extent to which some people can be different yet perceived as normal at the same time. This question points, in fact, to the perverse nature of the monolithic view of gender. Inclusion offers a kinder view of otherness. Bearing in mind the new definitions of gender diversity, the academy can impact influencing the new constructions in the social and intellectual fields, all in all in terms of avoiding the victimization of transgender subjects (Wiegman, 2002, p.74).

We need to deconstruct the conventional gender categories, and the logic behind them: otherwise, they remain traps of identity. According to Foucault (1977), the historical and social production about gender is fundamentally related to social control. The same man-woman binomial excludes other possibilities and definitively denies the constructive nature of gender; social institutions like universities and schools are structured according to this logic. Thus, the definitions of social organizations are based on this binary assumption, (p.28).

Normalized (De)Gendered Identities in Initial Language Teacher education Investigating contemporary colonial situations

Educational documents rooted in male-centered ideologies.

Heteronormativity involves so many practices that at this moment a world where this compendium of hegemonic norms is not dominant is unimaginable: these policies are opposed to the idea of normality. Transsexual subjects do not want to be normal, do not want to be subject to the dynamics of good and correct, not even in the category of heterosexual, which is another evidence of the monolithic character of institutions (Berlant and Warner, 2002, p.34).

This study was done at the Universidad Distrital Francisco Jose de Caldas, a public university in Bogotá Colombia, South America, specifically the LLEEI program (Professional teaching program with emphasis in English) of its Faculty of Education. I analyzed its “Initial Conditions” statement, which summarizes the program’s aims and approach, including the profile of future language teachers; and the general guidelines and procedures for obtaining a diploma in ELT.

Its syllabuses cover the following subjects: “*Epistemología y Pedagogía / Epistemology & Pedagogy*”; “*Perspectivas pedagógicas en la formación docente / Pedagogical perspectives on the education of teachers*”; “*Desarrollo Psicosocial del Niño y el Joven*” / The Psychosocial development of children and youngsters”; “*Ser, Sujeto y Multiculturalidad / Being, the Subject & Multiculturalidad*” and “*Language, Society & Cultural Identity*”.

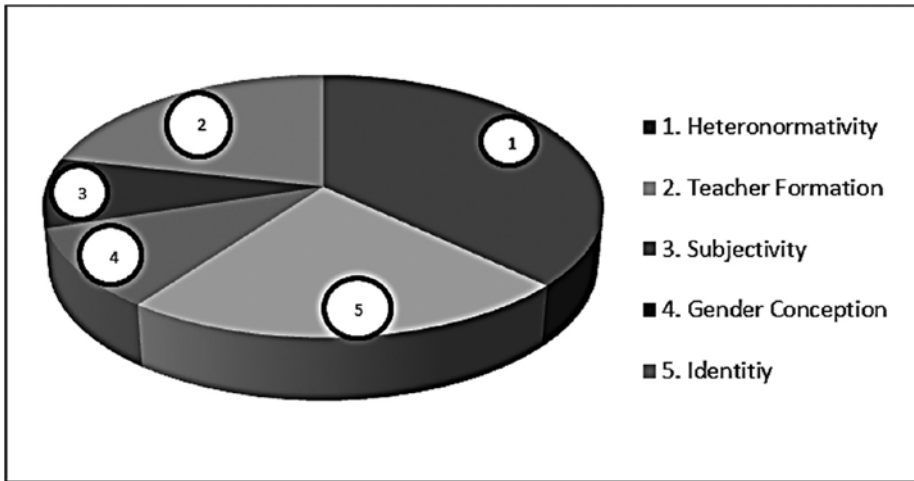
To analyze the documents, I found color coding to be a helpful tool, since, according to Dwyer and Moore, it “helps learners to organize information into useful patterns which enable the learners to interpret and adjust to the environment” (1995. p.6). The information was then adjusted to the categories found in previous studies of this subject: *Education of Teachers*, Adriana González, 2006; *Heteronormativity*, Lugones, 2003; *Gender Conceptions*, Meyer, 2018; *Subjectivity*, Foucault, 1977; *Identity*, Díaz Maggioli, 2004.

As first step, I analyzed the statement of “Initial Conditions” because it discusses personality, individuality and teaching procedures. I then selected those parts of syllabuses which deal with the subjectivity of the teaching process, the ones mentioned above. The overall purpose was to determine

if there were references to the inclusion of transgender students in the ELT courses. The analysis confirmed that “Initial Conditions” presents canonical ideas about gender: gender variability is not acknowledged in any of its principles and it is clear that students are regarded as de-gendered. Besides, the document does not offer any alternative to the dichotomous cisgender* idea of male and female teachers.

Figure 1 explains the findings obtained on the light of the categories proposed teacher formation, heteronormativity’s, gender conceptions, subjectivity, identity, related to the aspects analyzed in the initial conditions document.

Figure 1. Categories of analysis in the “Initial Conditions” document.



Source: Own

At first sight this exercise allowed me to affirm that the document “Initial Conditions” presents canonical ideas about gender, not gender variability is evidenced, the learners are dis gendered, the document does not show academic spaces for any other alternative than the dichotomy cisgender conception of male and female teachers.

On the other hand, Figure 2 shows how the categories teacher formation, heteronormativity’s, gender conceptions, subjectivity, identity were found in the syllabuses;

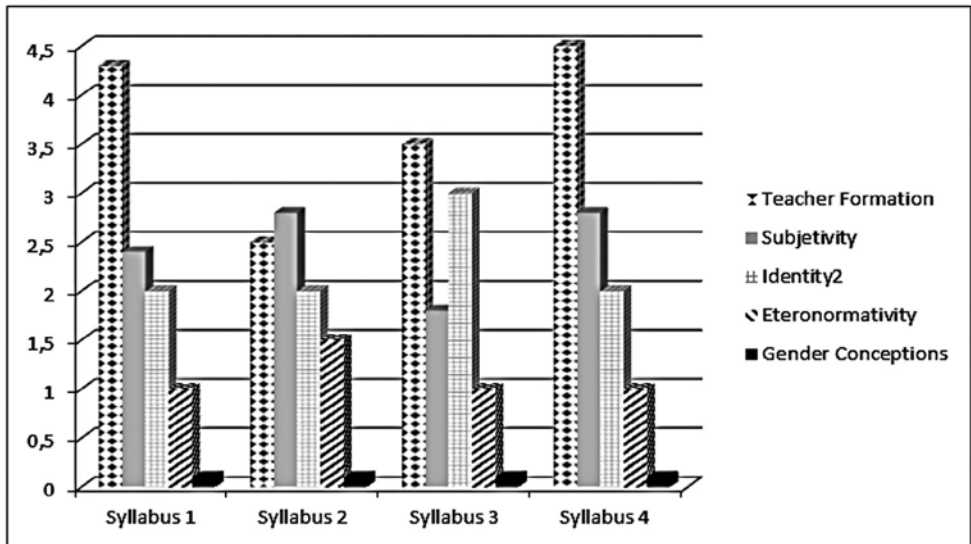
Syllabus 1 “Epistemología y Pedagogía”

Syllabus 2 “Perspectivas pedagógicas en la formación docente”

Syllabus 3 “Desarrollo Psicosocial del Niño y el Joven”

Syllabus 4 “Ser, Sujeto y Multiculturalidad”

Figure 2. Syllabuses analyzed.



Source: Own

In all the syllabuses the most prominent category was teacher formation, all are engaged with this purpose, followed by subjectivity, in the syllabuses two - “Perspectivas pedagógicas en la formación docente” and four - “Ser, Sujeto y Multiculturalidad” the category Subjectivity was found in the same intensity.

The syllabus three - “Desarrollo Psicosocial del Niño y el Joven” shows as the big component in its elaboration the category identity, also evident sharing the same level on the syllabus one, two and four. The category heteronormativity was evident in the entire four syllabus but in a lower scale, and finally the conception any kind of gender, rated the lowest scale in this analysis. The most prominent category was “teacher formation”, it is evident in all the courses, followed by “subjectivity”, which is prominent in courses two and four.

In third place was “identity”, which had an equal importance in courses one, two and four. The second most important category in course three is “identity”, as in courses one, two and four. The category “heteronormativity” is mentioned in all four, but to a lesser extent and finally, “any kind of gender variability” (homosexual, gay, transgender) is not mentioned in any.

From this, I conclude that there is no place for transgender students in the University, they do not exist. Thus, I hope this study will help to make transgender students of ELT more visible and encourage teachers to be more inclusive. It has also clarified the objective of my future work, which would be an inquiry into the subject of “*Identidad(es) Poder e Inequidad*” in the field of the teaching of EFL.

This exercise as well showed that all of the documents define the participant in the B. Ed language program as “*El Estudiante / The male student*” or “*Los Estudiantes*”, that is, as masculine but not of another gender, like female or transgender. Thus it seems evident that approach follows heteronormative principles, which suggests that the academic community is blind to the existence of other kinds of subjects.

According to Gore, (2000, p. 234) this normalization of gender is a constant feature of pedagogy, the subjects are expected to follow certain norms and are denounced when they don't. The guiding principle of the norms is “heterosexual only” and this extends to the field of ELT.

This raises the question: when did it happen? when did it become an accepted rule in our lives? To answer it, I investigated the history of this normalization, going back to accounts of transgenderism in some pre-Hispanic cultures, among other phenomena which historians have neglected and are forgotten today, in the period after colonialism.

In *Historia de la Cultura Material en la América Equinoccial* (Patiño, 1993, volume VII “Erotic life & Hygienic customs”), a character called *El Narrador* (the narrator) records the things he saw at the time of the Spanish conquest. The following passage caught my attention:

In America, homosexuality existed in different degrees, from tribes who only occasionally practiced it, like the Cumanagotos, Chibchas, Quimbayas, to others where it was tolerated and even institutionalized, in the Panamanian isthmus, the Caribbean coast, the northern coast of Peru coast and the northern coast of Ecuador (p.172).

From the above, it is possible to infer that in America the perception of gender differed from the binary conception we currently have. Also, lesbianism was tolerated before the colonial period, as seen in the following excerpt: *“Denominaban patagüia al lesbianismo, y a las que lo practicaban les decían patagüilani, “aplanchadoras”*. Dávila-Bolaños, (1974, p.173).

Such accounts show that there were at least four gender variables in pre-Columbian America. It was colonialism which imposed the concept of binary sexuality. This is an example of what Schatzki says: “the history of discourses has always been used, among other things, to justify and maintain the social order” (2001, p.13). Such documents show how gender variability has been banished from our current society.

Due to the binary conception of gender, transgender students have been excluded from the current educational context. We cannot deny that most of us grow up knowing what our gender is. I strongly believe that one of the main problems transgender students face is the lack of knowledge about gender and the fear it causes in “US”, those who are teaching future transgender language teachers.

Biological discourses

Intersexuality casts doubt on the binary division of gender into man and woman. But the heteronormative matrix, backed by the authority of medicine, is responsible for maintaining these criteria of normality. If an individual does not fit into this dichotomy, the person is excluded. Thus, by a drastic surgical intervention, the gender of the individual is reassigned. “The fact that this system, which guards the boundaries between the masculine and feminine categories, has existed for so long without arousing criticism or scrutiny from any side indicates the extreme discomfort that sexual ambiguity arouses in our culture”. Chery Chase (2005)

On the other hand, some studies argue that our ideas about gender may be wrong, for example, one by Dr. Ivanka Savic, who points out that:

There are two sexual chromosomes one is called X and the other is called Y, generally women have two chromosomes XX and men have one Y and one X, but a small percentage of babies are born with that

chromosomes arranged otherwise, as much as I know about sexual biology, least I think there are more than two genders (2015. P 23).

By nature, every person, tends to show (consciously or not) an attitude towards gender. This has become so important in our current society that it has even influenced classroom activities. As Atthill, C. (2009) says: "Gender is not an issue of women or men; it is an issue of people. 'Femininity' does not exist in isolation from 'Masculinity'."

The power of one person determines the power of another. Gender relations are neither "natural" nor given, they are constructed to make unequal relations seem "natural", and can only be naturalized under the pressure of socialization. Thus, it is clear there is a pressure on boys and girls to live in accordance with the established "norms" of masculinity and femininity.

The body reflects this double perspective: on one hand, it is a space for the imposition of power and on the other, it is a space for resistance. The subject of resistance enters into pedagogy; this resistance necessarily involves rethinking the place of our bodies in social settings (McLaren, 1997). For McLaren, the body is understood as a space of struggle. We are bodily marked to be different from the rest, to face conflict. Others do not always appreciate our bodies and this causes different reactions and contradictions. Our bodies are not monolithic: they are open to different interpretations.

Human sexuality is too complex to be limited to two words: "it is not because some people find attractive, but because so many people find it abhorrent" (Harris, quoted by Xavier Lizarraga, 2003, p. 197). We may find an answer in what Derrida calls "the absolute otherness" of being, where the others are seen as totally external, totally separated, totally others and when that happens, phobias are born Morris, (2005).

Recognizing each other is something we take for granted every day, but this may work in a different way for some people. According to Ariston (2018), many transgender people do not identify with the body they were born with: they nevertheless seem to have no other option. Thus, transgender people look into the mirror every morning and feel uncomfortable because they clearly recognize the image, but do not feel that this image represents their personhood.

The essence of transgender identity is the struggle to recognize that personhood when they look at their own body. My search for articles, books

and publications about gender variability and/or transgenderism in Colombian educational institutions showed almost nonexistent results. Transgenderism is still a myth in our country; we do not have enough information about it.

Political and academic discourses

One of the few studies of this issue I did find was done by the UNESCO (cited by Jacobs, 1996) called *Enfoque e identidades de género* (Gender approaches and identities), which concludes that: “gender inequality is more than a taboo, it is a real fact not only in societies but especially in the field of education, where it takes many forms, depending on the context. Gender inequality affects not only girls and boys, and women and men alike, but LGBTQ students are often even more disadvantaged” (UNESCO, 2017).

Although the municipal government of Bogotá has issued some policies about this problem, like “*Legislación y derechos de lesbianas, gays, bisexuales y transgeneristas en Colombia* (Legislation and the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender persons in Colombia, 2005); a policy which grants them social benefits, specifically health coverage, there is no mention of the situation of transgender persons in educational institutions.

The Colombian General Education Law “ratifies the obligatory nature of sex education as a transversal project and defines it as a process of permanent, personal, cultural and social education based on an integral concept of the human being”. Nevertheless, it perpetuates the binary notion of gender as either male or female. Ley General de Educación (Ley 115 de 1994).

As an example of this discrimination, a television news program reported the case of a transgender primary school teacher in Bogotá who dressed as a woman at her school (the gender identity she chose) and was immediately relegated to work in an office in the basement of the headquarters of the Ministry of Education. In her own words; “I was regarded as abnormal, as a monster”.

If that happened with an adult, it is easy to imagine the difficulties teachers of transgender student’s face when they see the anguish those students feel in schools and universities. As Grossman (2005) reminds us “females and males

have different educational outcomes and fulfill different gender-specific roles both in school and in society at large” (p.42)

Gender Diversity and the Denial of Transgender Identities

Purposes of my research and initial ideas

During my experience as teacher, I have found similar cases: for example, some young transsexual students who were misunderstood because of their gender identity, felt despair and sometimes dropped out. So, I have a strong interest in studying their problems. I think that all teachers who are concerned about their students feel helpless in these situations.

The work of the poetess Audre Lord is important for this study, because of the way she politicizes her experience as a Black lesbian. For me, while not a teacher herself, she is an exemplary educator, as exemplified by her famous remark that “the personal is political”, that is, hers is a pedagogy based on poetry. She believes that poetry has therapeutic powers and touches places which other genres cannot reach: intimate ones, those of silences, thanks to the power of words. While Foucault regards the body as a space for domination, control and oppression, Lorde situated it in the emotions (Lorde. 1984).

Unlike most mortals, Lorde is afraid of silence; she is not afraid of the words of others, but of their mutism. Black and lesbian in a racist society, she prefers to talk and be insulted to resigning herself to the silence of the oppressed. Lorde calls on us to think about our relationships with others who are afraid and regarded as aliens. We must recognize them in our interior: in this way, we search for inner peace and are no longer silenced by the structures of power. Her approach is similar to Foucault’s idea of “the technologies of the self” or what Azun Pié (2017) calls the process of distancing oneself from an imposed identity.

The problem is that there are very few models of gender which challenge the current “dual one”. We need models which ease the pressure of this binary approach and will lead to a state of infinite expansion for migratory sexualities which are permeable and fluid. Corrective pedagogies have constantly insisted on normalizing the abnormal. My idea is to build models on the pillars of

understanding and tolerance and explore the experiences and imaginaries of people who are “different”.

A fundamental part of my proposal is to do a rigorous and in-depth study of trainee teachers’ narratives about transgender students. It would be a guiding light not only for in-service transgender teachers but all teachers who see, in “difference”, a possibility to create a healthier learning environment. It will seek to unravel what local knowledge says about transgenderism. With this, I hope to contribute to the education of ELT, so that this profession will be more inclusive and open the way for new proposals.

These new proposals should involve a three-way approach to sexual identities which rejects the dichotomous approach of modernity, on the understanding that sexualities form a polyhedral reality that can hardly be circumscribed by the orthodox dichotomous models, which have a heterosexist position, based on the patriarchal misogynist and phallus-centric system of the traditional family, in Eve Kosofsky’s words:

However, we must be wary of new models which merely copy the traditional ones, because sexuality would continue to follow the same parameters and transsexuality would be nothing more than the opposite of heterosexuality and maintain the same heterosexist matrix, (1998, p.20).

Conclusions

It is remarkable to see how all of the documents about the diploma courses for future teachers at the Universidad Distrital Francisco Jose de Caldas refer to the students in the masculine case, either in singular or plural, not other gender ones, like female and much less, transgender.

Therefore, it is evident that the statements follow heteronormative principles. The problem is clear here: if the guidelines of the program do not include other gender variables, it is understandable that teachers and the school community will be blind to the existence of other kinds of subjects.

Thus, our study concludes that research into the approach to gender variability in teacher education programs in Colombia is of vital importance. All the good intentions of the programs will be in vain if we do not consider

the difficult situation of transgender persons who are educated to be or already are teachers and their friends and the community in general. We need to consolidate the work of transgender trainee teachers and address their educational needs. This will help to make transgender students and teachers of EFL more visible and advance in their profession.

My personal experience of teaching pre-service transgender teachers has guided the main question and objectives of my research:

Research Question

“What are the learning experiences of a transgender student in an initial language teacher education program and how are those experiences understood?”

General Objective

- To comprehend the personal learning experiences of a Transgender student in an initial teacher’s education program.

Specific Objectives

- To identify the learning experiences of a future transgender language teacher enrolled at a language education program at a state university in Bogotá (Colombia)
- To characterize the experiences identified above.
- To interpret how the learning experiences of this transgender student have shaped her life story and social practices as a future English language teacher.

After achieving the aforementioned objectives, I will develop an educational proposal (short on-line course) based on transgender identity and experience, even though personal learning experiences belong to the individual, it is possible to extrapolate these experiences as part of a course content based the “understanding” as a pillar to foster the future transgender teachers visibility in academic scenarios. This on-line course will be available for any educator, in-service teacher or person interested in learning about transgender identities.

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