Queer Activism in South African Education: A Book Review

Navan Govender (2023)
navan.govender@strath.ac.uk

University of Strathclyde: School of Education

ORCiD: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6764-1169
Twitter: @navangovender1

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Abstract

Dennis A. Francis' (2023) publication, Queer Activism in South African Education: Disrupting Cis(hetero)normativity in Schools, recognises and brings into visibility the experiences of queer youth, teachers and other school staff, and queer and trans activists. Throughout the book, moments of recognition suggest a radical movement toward more socially just practice, while others reveal the overwhelming persistence of oppressive norms. Although many aspects of South Africa's policy landscape might represent progressive and queer-trans-inclusive perspectives on human rights, education, health, governance, and so on, the lived realities of LGBTQI+ youth (and adults) continue to be filled with violence and suspicion (Msibi, 2012). Queer and trans people, communities, and activists, as revealed through the corpus of Francis' research in this book, are nevertheless powerful agents of change – from the everyday to the systemic.

Keywords

Queer activism, Cisheteronormativity, LGBTQI+ inclusion, Affect theory, Education

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> If the violence of what happened is recognised, as a violence that shapes the present, then the 'truths' of history are called into question. Recognition of injustice is not simply about others becoming visible (though this can be important). Recognition is also about claiming that an injustice did happen; the claim is a radical one in the face of the forgetting of such injustices (Ahmed, 2014, p 200).

Dennis A. Francis' (2023) publication, *Queer Activism in South African Education: Disrupting Cis(hetero)normativity in Schools*, recognises and brings into visibility the experiences of queer youth, teachers and other school staff, and queer and trans activists. While some moments of recognition suggest a radical movement toward more socially just practice, others perhaps reveal the persistence of oppressive norms. The quote above from Ahmed's (2014) *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, whose work Francis draws upon, explains that such visibility is but one part in a much broader, more complex network of feelings, bodies, objects, and ideologies. When viewed through the lens of cis(hetero)normativity, such experiences of violence (from the symbolic to the affective, to the bodily) can be explored and questioned in nuanced ways. In education, this includes understanding how queer and trans youth see and understand themselves as either, or both, victims and resilient agents of change within oppressive societies, how teachers and other school staff project fear and sometimes inadequacy onto (a)gender and (a)sexually diverse youth, and how queer and trans activists build communities of social and cultural change through complex negotiations of feeling, being, doing, and believing (Ewing, Brown, Mkize & Msibi, 2020).

Furthermore, engaging with the affective and educational politics of (a)gender and (a)sexual diversity in a South African context signifies another radical (re)orientation (Ahmed, 2006) toward disrupting racialised and colonial assumptions. As such, Francis and their participants also recognise how fear of the 'other' and a certain attachment to sameness – in relation to entangled issues and identities of race, ethnicity, coloniality and apartheid, class, (a)gender, and (a)sexuality – affect the (im)possibilities for inclusion, action, and social transformation. This is despite South Africa's Constitution as a world-leading example of progressive and inclusive policy-making. At the disjuncture between the constitution and the lived realities of teachers, learners, communities, and activists lies the complex and messy circulations of emotions that maintain, disrupt, and/or create the conditions for queer and trans inclusivity.

Defining cisheteronormativity as 'a central cultural regulatory device that authorises homophobia and transphobia" (p. 3), *Queer Activism in South African Education* brings together queer, feminist, and education studies to unpick the ways in which participants' interactions with schooling, and education more broadly, are entangled in the politics of (a)gender and (a)sexual diversity. It is useful to quote Francis at length on the aims of their book and the empirical studies presented:

> I draw on Ahmed's work to think about how schooling serves as a straightening device – ensuring that education is orientated around the straight body. Although Ahmed does not write directly about cisheteronormativity as it applies to education, her writing does have relevance nevertheless for everyday schooling – how bodies, space and objects interact. In the context of schooling, objects do not merely refer to physical objects but also practices, curriculum, pedagogies, sport, social events and rituals. For example, think about what might happen when schools reject the rules of compulsory cisheteronormativity or deviate from the line and make contact with objects such as Queer and Transgender Organisations that are not supposed to be there (pp. 10-11).

Two main ideas might be taken from this: Firstly, that the policy-implementation gap in South African society persists, and that it is within this context that (a)gender and (a)sexual diversity is constructed 'as objects of fear or repulsion' (p. 55). Homophobia, transphobia, misogyny, and gender-based violence continue to be rife, mediated by both interpersonal and institutionally sanctioned mechanisms in and out of schooling contexts. The conditions for teaching and learning are therefore limited by unclear school or district-level policies, access to cis(hetero)normative teaching resources (such as textbooks), teachers' feelings of under-preparedness or complicity in discrimination, school managers' reluctance to support change (or indeed the role of their own prejudices), and circulation of misinformation about LGBTQI+ people, health, and culture (see chapter 2).

Secondly, Francis' work in this publication presents a certain hope. Amidst the stories of violence and apprehension to address that violence, the collection of research studies signals the different ways in which school-going learners, teachers, and Queer and Transgender Organisations (QTOs) connect and form alliances, even briefly, to disrupt normativities. Is it through these close encounters and coalitions that the possibilities for schooling institutions and practices are suddenly exposed for their inclusive and affirming potentials. Queer and transgender youth, queer and transgender teachers, as well as the allies that exist in South African education therefore reposition themselves as agents of change rather than only victims of wider social, cultural, political, and ideological powers (see also Francis and Kjaran, 2020).

Chapters 2 and 3, for instance, demonstrate some of the stark contrasts between the experiences of (a)gender and (a)sexually diverse South Africans in education with those conforming teachers and school managers. On one hand, the former relate stories of enduring symbolic, physical, and emotional-psychological violence through the erasure of LGBTQI+ issues in the curriculum, as well as experiences of bullying and discrimination that emerge from institutionalised cis(hetero)normativity. Placing LGBTQI+ matters 'out of view' (p. 27) operationalises erasure and silencing and is further reiterated through repetitions of limited to no access to information, 'creating an impression that there are no gender diverse or transgender learners in South African schools' (p. 31). On the other hand, the latter reveal how queerness and trans-ness are vilified through microaggressions, victim-blaming, fear of being associated with LGBTQI+ people and politics by showing too much interest. While there are also examples of teachers attempting to address issues of bullying and discrimination (see p. 50-54), these are still limited and overlooked for their educational and pedagogical utility.

Chapters 4-7, however, bring to light a certain hope for LGBTQI+ youth, teachers, and activists in South African education. In many ways, Francis reorientates the reader toward those queer and trans-inclusive actions, spaces, and dispositions that enable social justice education, education that is critical of power and privilege (Kumashiro, 2000), and the production of more inclusive affective economies. Although these moments are located in the persistent workings of disempowerment of queer and trans youth and activists in South Africa, they also represent the powerful work and people that endure. One such example that Francis foregrounds is the educational and pedagogical potential of schools connecting with QTOs. Such connections demonstrate how QTOs are 1) valuable sites of knowledge production, 2) critical-creative communities that generate anti-oppressive pedagogies and social practices, and 3) the locus of critically literate resources that are also humanising and contextually responsive.

Because QTOs are already oriented toward the politics of (a)gender and (a)sexually diverse experiences as sites of both violence and critical-creative cultural work, schools can, and do, benefit from creating alliances (see chapter 4). QTOs also actively situate their work and impact in the context of policy requirements, the constitution, and the needs of LGBTQI+ communities. As such, they offer schools with little to no access to current and contextually relevant information, for

instance, the necessary support, knowledge, experience, and critical viewpoints required to interrogate intersectional and cis(hetero)normative structures of power (see chapter 6). The final chapter therefore outlines these possible futures in a way that (student) teachers, teacher educators, school management, policy-makers, activists, and researchers might use to initiate further action.

Although many aspects of South Africa's policy landscape might represent progressive and queer-trans-inclusive perspectives on human rights, education, health, governance, and so on, the lived realities of LGBTQI+ youth (and adults) continue to be filled with violence and suspicion (Msibi, 2012). Queer and trans people, communities, and activists, as revealed through the corpus of Francis' research, are nevertheless powerful agents of change – from the everyday to the systemic. Online education and social media (see chapter 5), for instance, is a means for QTOs to place themselves within reach of queer and trans youth, especially in the absence of (a)gender and (a)sexual diversity affirming, and accurate, information. The hope presented by alliances between education and activism is therefore not one to be overlooked if policy and rhetoric are to be realised in any meaningful ways, especially as this publication has implications for research, practice, and policy-making internationally. In South Africa and internationally, such alliances are also necessary for the continued work in outreach (Francis, Kjaran & Lehtonen, 2020), on developing queer critical literacies in teacher education (Govender & Andrews, 2021; Andrews, 2020), as well as the continued need to de/reconstruct the role of critical, queer, trans, and decolonial studies (Singh, 2021; Koch et al., 2020) that also resists homonormativity and the homogenisation of what queer and trans-inclusive education might look like when the local politics of power are foregrounded.

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