

STICKS AND STONES: CHALLENGING OPPRESSIVE LANGUAGE IN CLASSROOM SETTINGS

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When slogans on t-shirts worn to school receive national attention, the taken-for-granted power of language is accentuated. According to Harmon and Wilson (2006), “it is through language that we learn and come to understand the world we live in, adopt our world-views, become socialized and develop and maintain relationships” (p. 1). As Johnson and Milani (2010) explain, language plays a role in shaping and maintaining social ideologies, values and practices. This means that language also has the power to validate oppressive social conditions that privilege some groups while marginalizing others. This recognition is extremely important for educators. Acknowledging the deleterious impact of violent and marginalizing language is an important step in the fostering of more inclusive, equitable and socially just educational environments. For educators, this highlights the importance of challenging discriminatory, oppressive and violent language and discourses, even when they surface in informal situations in schools. However, as Jennings (1999) explains, “offering a recipe for success [for how to address oppressive language and discourses] is not easy” (n.p.); classroom tensions, an educator’s anxieties, and social/institutional responsibilities all influence how these matters can be addressed. In this article, we appreciate this concern and draw attention to complexities associated with efforts to support social justice issues in high schools. Specifically, we highlight tensions that we, as educators committed to supporting equity and social justice, have experienced when challenging oppressive language and discourses with students. We address contradictions associated with professional responsibilities, and conclude by providing a series of questions some educators may find helpful for reflection. We begin, however, with a discussion of discursive tensions we have experienced when addressing oppressive language.

In high schools, we commonly hear taken-for-granted language that devalues groups based on sexuality, religion, ethnicity, gender, class and ability. As educators we frequently hear students address each other using certain words pejoratively. For example, we hear students make comments like, “don’t be a fag,” “he’s such a jew” or “you’re so retarded”. While we recognize that neutrality and silence toward this oppressive language can amount to tacit acceptance that perpetuates oppressive social practices, we have had difficulties in challenging this language with students. Specifically, we are met with responses that stymie our attempts to draw attention to the oppressive character of the language. In some cases, students have responded to our efforts by explaining that their intent in using this language with their friends is not out of malice. They explain that because they do not *intend* to be insulting, their

language is not hurtful. What is missed in this appeal is that, while they may not be intending to be hurtful, language can be oppressive at societal and systemic levels, perpetuating binary oppositions where a dominant cultural group is privileged and one is devalued. *As educators, how should we respond to this appeal? At what point should we intervene to challenge taken-for-granted oppressive language?*

Another discursive tension we commonly experience arises when discussions about equity and social justice are neutralized by arguments like, “racism doesn’t exist anymore”, “women are equal now”, and “it’s okay to be gay now.” While we agree that social change around these issues has occurred, arguments like these are problematic. They negate a reality that many individuals within schools and societies continue to encounter oppression, marginalization and violence because dominant social ideologies and practices still value some groups over others (Hickman, 2011). Statements like “racism doesn’t exist anymore” signify discursive avoidance techniques that maintain systems of oppression and marginalization. Suggesting that systems of inequity no longer exist simply means that individuals are neglecting to recognize the existence of conditions other than their own. *How, as educators, can we interrupt these discourses? What can we do to ensure students understand how historical practices of racism/sexism/homophobia continue to exist in the present? Where is there space in curricula to raise questions and engage in dialogue with students about the harmful consequences of these practices?*

While we hope to challenge the prevalence of oppressive language, we also have some reservations about professional responsibilities which dictate how we *should* respond when it surfaces in schools. When we see a swastika drawn on a student’s binder, or a sign that reads, “Kick me! I’m queer”, or “more freedom for the whites” written in an assignment about improving a school, as educators we are required to authoritatively adhere to the punitive requirements of school policy. We are torn because we hope to balance these requirements with our own commitment to foster education for social justice and, further, we wonder about the implications of a punitive approach. As teachers striving for genuine social change around these issues, we must ask ourselves whether only authoritative/punitive responses are most effective. While appeals to authority may communicate a message about what types of language are not welcomed in a school or classroom, these actions also individualize the problem to specific students. Therefore, we are failing to acknowledge that the oppressive language is symptomatic of much larger cultural/discursive/ideological issues. Additionally, challenging the language does not necessarily guarantee that students will alter their linguistic choices. This means that our actions may not actually change the thinking/values/ideologies beneath the language which validates marginalization. *If students are not intrinsically and genuinely motivated to curb oppressive language, then how can we hope to bring about anything more than superficial change?*

Because all educational situations are contextually specific, we respect our limited abilities to offer suggestions for educators experiencing these tensions, constraints and anxieties. Instead, we would like to conclude by offering a few reflective questions we hope others may find useful for contemplation. For us, the first question an educator must ask if/when s/he encounters oppressive language is: *what are the consequences of doing nothing?* Should oppressive language surface, it is important to consider the messages that are communicated to students through an educator’s

silence. When considering this question, educators can also begin to consider the role they play in the validation and perpetuation of oppressive language. Additionally, we also find the following questions to be helpful in our own efforts to strive for socially just and equitable educational environments: *How can these conversations occur without having to resort to an authoritative/punitive tone? How do school structures and policies shape how teachers address oppressive language, (e.g. does policy dictate that punitive measures be taken)? And At what point are our interventions limiting students' speech?* While we hope that educators reading this article find these questions helpful, we also understand how complexities and constraints make addressing social justice issues in schools difficult. However, these complexities should not dissuade educators from this effort. It is vital that educators find the courage to challenge oppressive language and discourses, and the realities they construct in our schools.

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