

Sexiles in the Classroom: Understanding Intersectionalities of Sexuality, Immigration, and Education¹

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Abstract: This paper presents an overview of literature on adult educators who are both queer and immigrant. Although very little scholarly writing exists, several scholars describe the experiences of queer immigrants as being anchored to systemic heteronormativity. Additionally, the experiences of immigrant adult educators suggest difficult encounters with racism and sexism.

Using Paulo Freire's life experience as an exile in Switzerland as a reference point, Freire, in his interview with Faundez (2001), explains how living in exile means coming to terms with being uprooted from *home* and planting new roots in a foreign location. This is not an easy and uncomplicated task. Pointedly, Freire states,

If you put down roots too deeply in your new environment, then you run the risk of denying your origins. But, if you put down no roots at all in your new environment, then you run the risk of being annihilated in a nostalgia which it will be difficult to free yourself from. (Freire & Faundez, 2001, p. 190)

The process of re-location is mixed with tensions as a person shifts between two environments. One tension originates from the environment that exiles consider to be their homeland, which has shaped their behaviors in the new setting. Sometimes these behaviors are incongruent with the cultural norms of the new environment. Second, exiles cannot ignore their involvement within a new life context. Within the new environment, exiles try to make sense of and negotiate day-to-day encounters in their personal and professional lives (Freire & Faundez, 2001). These two tensions can provoke negative experiences with oppression and social exclusion if there are no resources or supports put into place to assist exiles with their transition.

In response to this negative tension, Freire and Faundez (2001) recommend that, "we need to set a conversation going between these two environments" (p. 200). Following Freire & Faundez (2001), through this paper I initiate a conversation that reflects on some of the struggles suggested in the literature concerning the movement of people between their "home" and "foreign" locations. Although there are many people crossing borders for a variety of reasons, I approach this particular topic through the lens of queer, immigrant, adult educators. I chose queer, immigrant, adult educators because they occupy a multiply-marginalized position of being both immigrant and queer, and yet hold a position of power in the classroom as being an educator. In light of this binary of queer, immigrant educators possessing dominant and unstable positionalities, following Guzmán (1997), I refer to them as "sexiles."

Guzmán (1997) defines sexiles as being "the exile of those who have had to leave their nation of origin on account of their sexual orientation" (p. 227). He uses this term to characterize the experiences of middle and upper-class gay male migrants to the United States mainland from Puerto Rico. These participants considered themselves as being a type of "bourgeois sexiles" who were superior and more successful than working-class queer immigrants

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to the United States (Guzmán, 1997). My borrowed use of the term highlights the purposes of why immigrant, queer adult educators may leave their home countries and further characterizes the dual positionalities of power that constitute and complicate their lives. In short, queer, immigrant educators are socially *excluded* by reason of their sexual and ethnic differences, but socially *included* through their role as adult educators. As an intellectual form of self-exile, queer, immigrant adult educators could decidedly suppress particular knowledges that counter “legitimate” knowledge in their new environments. This consequence also deprives adult learners of learning diverse ways to think about and place value on knowledge and of how to challenge structural and cultural processes that qualify and privilege only certain aspects of knowledge. In response, the question that focuses my literary inquiry here is as follows: What does the literature describe as being some of the challenges and recommendations when considering the lives of queer, immigrant, adult educators? I expect that this question will show how a change in work context, inclusive of the political, sociocultural, economic, and religious dynamics, shapes the behaviors of this particular group of educators.

Bridging the two life perspectives of being a queer immigrant and being an immigrant educator through this paper brings attention to how non-normative identities experience greater difficulty when crossing borders. Chiefly, these intercultural encounters are meant to exchange understandings, practices, and ideas on various subject matters including hotly contested issues in certain contexts, such as HIV/AIDS and/or gender equality. To better facilitate this exchange, adult educators need to develop inclusive learning relationships based on trust, respect, hope, and cultural sensitivity in order to meaningfully teach in a foreign culture (Chang, 2007; Grace, 1996). Developing an equitable and respectful relationship is no simple feat and any exchange between educator and learners requires a great deal of dialogue given differences in identity, culture, and context (Freire, 1970/2008, 1985). For some educators, developing a productive relationship with learners in a foreign context becomes an especially arduous task because knowledge is shaped by social, historical, and political contexts (Mojab, 2006) and, as a result, long-standing prejudices existing towards certain social identities target the adult educator in the classroom.

Queer adult educators, in particular, are certainly not strangers to exclusion practices, given the pervasiveness of homophobia in society. And yet, many of these educators still risk crossing borders to teach adult learners in contexts very different than their own. For educators who travel from economically “developed” nations (for example, Canada or the United States) to “developing” (for example, Argentina or Thailand) nations, their citizenship helps them, in some part, navigate through deeply-rooted sexual prejudice. However, for educators who travel from “developing” nations to “developed” nations, their transition is not usually as promising or as positive. In fact, these educators could face additional challenges, given that they originate from nations often regarded as being *backward* and *uneducated* (Willinsky, 1998).

The literature is largely silent on the topic of queer, immigrant educators. Having said this, there are useful insights to gain when examining the experiences of “immigrant adult educators” and “queer immigrants” separately. After I review both of these perspectives, I provide a literary analysis based on my work. I then complete this literature review with a conclusion.

Method

For this literature review, an integrative search method was conducted in October, 2011. This search was operationalized primarily through four literary search engines that were relevant to transnational sexuality studies, immigration studies, and education. Data bases included:

ERIC, Web of Science, and Worldcat. I began by creating three categories of search terms: (a) sexuality-themed terms: “queer”, “gay”, “lesbian”, “bisexual”, or “sexual minorities”, (b) immigrant-themed terms: “immigrant”, “newcomers”, or “refugees”, and (c) adult educator-themed terms: “adult educators”, “community educators”, “visiting professors”, or “faculty members”. I combed through and selected any relevant qualitative and quantitative texts.

After relevant articles or books were located, each text was grouped into a chart according to thematic subheadings of *immigrant adult educators* and *queer immigrants*. I selected these subheadings because they tended to describe the general ideas discussed in the literature. Reference information as well as an annotated description were a part of each chart entry. Once this chart was completed, I was in a better position to provide an overview of what was represented in the literature based on this study topic. The following results section represented what I uncovered in the literature.

Results

In this section I identify three areas of concern that are based on the literature and form my analysis: (a) difficult encounters of queer immigrants, (b) difficult encounters of immigrant educators and (c) a literary analysis in light of sexiles in the classroom. I explain each in turn.

Difficult Encounters of Queer Immigrants

Understanding the experiences of queer immigrants has recently garnered much attention in social science literature, but mainly from a North American perspective. In addition to an analysis of the life experiences of queer immigrants, a queer perspective on immigration informs how sexuality impacts and becomes implicated in the migratory processes (Naples & Vidal-Ortez, 2009). Largely viewed through feminist and poststructuralist perspectives, the experiences of queer immigrants as described in the literature highlight heteronormative systems that exclude queer realities in both *home* environments and new environments. Writing within the United States context, Luibhéid (2004), who writes extensively on the experiences of queer immigrants, explains:

Heteronormative policies and practices – which subordinate immigrants not just on grounds of sexual orientation but also on grounds of gender, racial, class, and cultural identities that may result in ‘undesirable’ sexual acts or outcomes (such as ‘too many’ poor children) – are deployed by the state to select who may legally enter the United States and to incorporate immigrants into hegemonic nationalist identities and projects.

Sexuality more generally also structures every aspect of immigrant experiences. (p. 227)
Part of the problem, as Luibhéid views it, is that immigration officials mislead the public by stating that sexuality as “private” and not an issue in cross-border situations.

Yet, sexuality scholars like Luibhéid (2004) have pointed out otherwise. They argue that the State has very much made an intervention by structuring sexuality along heteronormative lines. For example, housing and shelter providers should consider sexuality and gender identity as the *cause* of homelessness among young people. In addition, transgendered individuals are challenged when sponsoring partners even after sex reassignment surgery and legal marriage in other countries (Chavez, 2011). Visible cues can betray queer applicants. Such cues could include the time of arrival to the port of entry (for example, just before pride parades), their belongings, third party informants, organizational affiliations and obtaining medical certificates that ask for a description of lifestyle practices (Luibhéid, 1998). In the case of obtaining such certificates, this procedure implies that medical practices provide a venue for homophobia to be “mobilized, channeled and legitimated” (Luibhéid, 1998, p. 489) in official medical discourse. Given the historical and controversial practice of medical professionals classifying and

diagnosing homosexuality in the United States, the presence once again of screening out homosexuality is indeed troubling and eerily reflective of a dark past that traumatized queer people. In response, just as Freire and Faundez (2001) warn about “denying your origins” (p. 190), queer asylum seekers engage with this structure to denounce their home countries as being *backwards* and *unproductive* in exchange for American “beneficence” (Cantu, Luibhéid & Stern, 2005; Solomon, 2005).

There have been additional responses to structural violence described in the literature. Pointedly, resistance movements against hetero-privilege emerge as a way to assert agency (Mizzi, 2010). Performative tactics such as ambiguity, trickery, wordplay, and small non-truths all characterize the lives of queer immigrants (Fisher, 2003; Randazzo, 2005). As Randazzo (2005) points out, these strategies are similarly found in home countries as survival skills gained from living in homophobic communities. For example, introducing same-sex lovers as “best friends” at weddings blur the boundaries of sexual categories (Fisher, 2003). Having said this, I observe here that there is a popular misconception that the new environment will be respectful to sexual-difference. Queer immigrants looking for a more “free” society towards homosexuality are sometimes disappointed at the amount of violence that persists towards queer people in the new environment (Kuntsman, 2009). In one research project on Russian-speaking queer people who immigrated to Israel, the study participants shared how they became homesick when they uncovered similar forms of homophobic violence in Israel that they thought they had escaped by leaving Russia. In this specific case, the act of being excluded from enjoying privileges afforded to heterosexual people terrified these immigrants, considering that they also faced ethnocentric violence based on their foreign identity (Kuntsman, 2009).

In short, the literature clearly outlines many of the challenges facing queer immigrants. From social exclusion to structural violence, queer immigrants have endured a long struggle in their adjustment to their new environment. I now discuss some of difficulties facing immigrant adult educators.

Difficult Encounters of Immigrant Adult Educators

The literature on immigrant adult educators describes a struggle in the classroom between (a) students adjusting to their foreign educator, and (b) the educator trying to navigate through classroom practices while adhering to immigration-related policy directives (Amobi, 2004; Collins, 2008). More specifically, in several related studies on immigrant adult educators, most students stated that they were challenged by their educators’ foreign accents and limited vocabulary, while a minority of students made adjusting to accents a part of the learning process (Alberts, 2008; Liang, 2006; Marvasti, 2005). As Marvasti (2005) writes, “Language, even accent, may be used as a proxy for an individual’s level of skills and lead to prejudice and discriminatory behavior in the work environment” (p. 154). Although Marvasti’s (2005) point here is an important consideration that speaks to a narrative of student resistance in the classroom, there were other types of marginalization described in similar studies. In particular, Schmidt (2010) found in her study on the experiences of immigrant teacher candidates at a College of Education in the United States that there was evidence of discrimination, contradictory hiring and salary standards, intolerance of dress, hostility toward certain pronunciation patterns of English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, and anti-immigrant discourses in College of Education classes (see also Ezer, 2006; Manrique & Manrique, 1993).

Educators’ responses to being “othered” in their own classrooms remain mixed. On one hand, adult educators seek institutional support, such as the provision of workshops and other forms of training, to help acculturate them to their classroom (Manrique & Manrique, 1993). On

the other hand, some immigrant educators marginalize students in order to re-affirm their dominant power in the classroom (Li, 2006). In her study on immigrant, female scholars in higher education, Li (2006) found that her study participants influence power relationships that “perpetuate the positioning” (p. 119) of immigrant, female educators by their minority students who poorly treated their educators. Perhaps this continued distancing takes place as a result of difficult immigration processes that have caused immigrants to feel undervalued, marginalized, and unwelcomed in their new environment (Collins, 2008).

Collins (2008) indicated that some of the problems faculty members immigrating to the United States include obtaining Green Cards, handling cultural differences, and coping with loneliness. In addition to this specific study, Elbaz-Luwisch (2004) noted in her study of Russian teachers immigrating to Israel that the experience of crossing borders has led to an increased institutional dependency, feeling like an imposter in the classroom, and self-regulating behaviors in accordance with the new sociocultural environment. I observe here that there is little institutional response to the immigrant instructors. In both of these cases, immigrant educators have had to deal with adjustment difficulties, which places strain on the relationships with their students.

Turning a disadvantage to an advantage is an important step here. In one autoethnography, Li (2006) describes her adaptation to the new environment as an opportunity to develop a new sense of self and gender identity. Li also reaffirms a social responsibility to educate and equip students on understanding the various deployments of power and mutuality, so that students and faculty share an increased connection and are able to support each other. From this point, I bridge the two discussion points of being queer immigrants and immigrant educators and assert some recommendations to address some of the challenges that may arise when crossing borders to work in a new environment.

Literary Analysis

Learning about sexiles in the classroom means critically understanding and interrogating the fundamental differences that implicate queer immigrants teaching in new environments. Although specific situations of these sexiles is absent in the literature, some observations can be extrapolated. One observation is how difficult the immigration process may be for queer people. Queer immigrant educators may not weather this transition so well and could require assistance that is highly specific to their needs. Providing support outside the classroom (for example, peer support or mentoring schemes) and inviting the unique perspectives that these educators possess could be positive steps. However, it may take more than just placing rainbow stickers on doors and windows to invite safe and respectful discussions on sexual-difference. These queer-positive public statements may have little meaning for immigrants who do not understand or connect to Western-oriented forms of inclusion and rights of queerness.

Analyzing the experiences of immigrant educators in the literature reveals a theme of resilience. By reflecting and engaging in her experiences and deliberately reaching out to others, Amobi (2008) turned her “otherness and difference into uniqueness and self-affirmation” (p. 177). She eventually learns and gains acceptance as an instructor in pre-service teacher education. In response to the pressure to conform to the new sociocultural environment, Amobi comments that playing safe does not serve any good to an immigrant educator and, in fact, limits one’s growth.

One course of action would be for institutions to promote multi-cultural awareness and sensitivity as an effort to reduce tensions and to support queer, immigrant educators in their transition processes (Manrique & Manrique, 1993; Schmidt, 2010). Situated in a College of

Education context, Schmidt (2010) writes, “To combat the resulting employment discrimination, teacher education faculties have a crucial role to play in emphasizing—through teaching, fieldwork, and research—the numerous contributions immigrant teachers offer schools and wider communities” (p. 250). I observe here that institutions need to be comprehensive and inclusive when it comes to considering the lives of immigrant educators. To be inclusive not only considers the racialized experiences of immigrants, but views their lives through gender, sexuality and other identity markers.

Other recommendations in the literature include mentorship and facilitation from junior and senior faculty to assist with transitions and adjustments. In addition, adult learning institutions should put forth actions for leadership personnel to: (a) become more aware of the related challenges, and (b) implement programs that assist foreign faculty transition to their new work context (Collins, 2008; Liang, 2006; Marvasti, 2005). In relation, Marvasti (2005) writes, “Steps should be taken [at the institutional level] to improve faculty teaching effectiveness, to change stereotypic perceptions, to support fair and equal treatment of foreign-born faculty, and to promote cooperation among faculty, students and administration with foreign-born faculty” (p. 169). Cooperation could mean incorporating immigrant voices in all aspects of teaching and learning. It could also mean that both non-immigrant and immigrant educators create awareness of language-differences in their classrooms, gain further insight about their professional attitudes, and learn how to create a more just and inclusive society through welcoming positive aspects of different cultural backgrounds and experiences (Ezer, 2006).

Conclusion

An analysis of experiences of both queer immigrants and immigrant adult educators in the literature has suggested that certain knowledges (for example, life in their homelands) become suppressed during the migratory processes. For educators, these encounters with crossing borders affect their teaching practices. In part, this is due to the power-filled and powerful discourses that occupy educational situations. Yet, the literature also suggests that some structural barriers act as another form of marginalization. Although the literature on queer immigrants is indeed descriptive and informative, to view their experiences through professional lenses as being educators adds another layer. Equity discourses create very little change if they do not consider the sociocultural realities that make up individual lives. Consequences could result in a reduction of quality teaching and learning experiences for students and lower expectations for job satisfaction among immigrant educators. The experiences of sexiles in the classroom provide one avenue to re-consider how equity discourses shape individual lives and how they can be better able to provide support.

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