EMBRACING A HOMONORMATIVE CULTURE INTO OUR SCHOOLS

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Despite receiving more acceptance in the past decade, the LGBTQIA+ community continues to struggle in heteronormative policies (e.g. gendered uniform restrictions, required haircuts) of the Philippine education system. Putting expectations of heterosexuality and obligating gender non-conforming and queer students to conform with gender binary labels within schools further marginalizes and oppresses the LGBTQIA+ population.

Scholars defined heteronormativity as the societal expectation towards people to “look and act”, in all situations, in congruence with their biological sex. This pertains to conforming to the typical male-masculine and female-feminine stereotypes. Yet, what does it truly mean to appear and behave in congruence to the genitalia? Should we force our students to wear “appropriate” clothes even though they are uncomfortable? How would this affect them? Dr. Ronnel Joseph Competente, a DepEd teacher at Tinago National High School had an encounter with his former student, Kenny, who identified as “gay”. Kenny asked him if he could wear a gown for their prom. As a gay teacher, he instantly said yes and he saw that Kenny was ecstatic. Unfortunately, some of the school’s officials were against it, including the principal hence, Kenny was not allowed to wear a gown and he skipped prom. This is a clear invalidation and ignorance of transgender and non-conforming individuals.

If one would analyze the situation, they might conclude that Kenny is a gay man who loves to wear gowns and present himself as feminine. On the other hand, it could also be possible that Kenny is a transgender woman and he is not aware of the proper
labels for his sexuality. This is where the concept of sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (SOGIE) comes in place.

The problem in cases like this originates from the unfamiliarity of educators and admin officers when it comes to knowing the SOGIE of a person and its impact on well-being. Because of this apathy, anti-LGBTQIA+ policies are existing in schools. There were even instances where transgender college students (or stereotypically termed as a “cross-dresser”) were asked to sign contracts to ensure that they will not express their SOGIE, imposing that students whose SOGIE conforms to societal expectations are not required to do the same.

Hindering them from expressing their true identity poses adversity to their mental health and personal development. When left unchecked, heteronormativity in schools may restrict the freedom of gender non-conforming students to freely express themselves regardless of their gender identity and sexual orientation. The cultivation of a heteronormative culture in our educational system is rarely challenged because it is the majority, however it becomes a breeding ground for discrimination and bullying.

To combat the problem with heteronormative policies, the Department of Education introduced the Gender-Responsive Basic Education Policy (D.O. No. 32, s. 2017) to encourage the acceptance of homonormativity into our system. This policy allows DepEd employees to promote student rights regardless of their SOGIE, and to eliminate the stereotype of being a “disgrace” as an LGBTQIA+ youth. Although the policy has been legalized, there is still a challenge in establishing mainstream practices in handling issues on students’ gender preferences and acknowledging homonormativity. One of the first steps we should take is to educate teachers on SOGIE and gender sensitivity, and through providing instructional materials in schools. Most importantly, we should understand that gender is fluid. It is not a binary that is only made up of cisgender males and females, but it is – in fact – a complex spectrum.
References:
