"Are You Really Gay Prof?": The Transgressive Self as a Pedagogical Tool

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Abstract

Notwithstanding progressive constitutional protections, LGBTQ+ identities persist in being marginalised and stigmatised within numerous South African educational contexts. This occurs particularly in teacher education programmes where heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions frequently remain unchallenged. In this article, I examine the potentialities and constraints of transgressive embodiment as a pedagogical instrument for disrupting these oppressive norms and cultivating more inclusive learning environments. Drawing on theoretical insights from queer theory, critical pedagogy and postcolonial studies, I present my experiences of teaching while being visibly and unapologetically queer. These narratives are analysed through a critical, intersectional framework that considers the ways in which gender, sexuality, race and other axes of identity and power shape the pedagogical encounter. My experiences indicate that transgressive embodiment can serve as a potent tool for challenging heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions in the classroom, thereby creating space for alternative ways of knowing and being. By situating these experiences within global discourses on queer pedagogy, this article contributes to international conversations about the transformative potential of embodied resistance in diverse educational contexts. These experiences also underscore the risks and limitations of this approach. These include the emotional and professional toll of hypervisibility, the potential for student resistance and misunderstanding, and the necessity for institutional and systemic change alongside individual acts of resistance. Autoethnographic reflections such as these can contribute to a more nuanced and situated understanding of the complexities of queer pedagogies, while also indicating potential avenues for further research and praxis.

Keywords: transgressive pedagogy; teacher education; South Africa; autoethnography; embodiment; social justice; global queer pedagogies

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Introduction

In the realm of higher education in South Africa, discussions about sexual and gender diversity often remain shrouded in silence, relegated to the margins of official curriculum spaces (Balfour, 2016; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022; Msibi, 2019). Despite the country's progressive constitution that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Republic of South Africa, 1996), and the mandate for all educators to be inclusive and responsive to diversity (Department of Education, 2001), there is a persistent gap between policy and practice when it comes to addressing the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other gender nonconforming (LGBTQ+) learners and staff in educational institutions (Francis, 2023). This gap between policy and practice is not unique to South Africa but reflects a global pattern identified by scholars across various national contexts, including the United States (Mayo, 2022), the United Kingdom (Nixon & Givens, 2007), Australia (McBrien et al., 2022) and Namibia (Awarab & Brown, 2024). However, what distinguishes the South African situation is the particular post-apartheid context that creates a unique tension between constitutional progressivism and persistent cultural conservatism regarding sexuality and gender expression.

As a gay-identifying professor working in the field of teacher education, I have long grappled with the challenge of breaking this silence and creating inclusive environments where pre-service teachers can freely explore and express their identities, as well as develop the knowledge and skills necessary to support their future LGBTQ+ learners. This is a particularly pressing concern given the well-documented prevalence of homophobic and transphobic bullying in South African schools (Mguye & Omodan, 2023; Ubisi, 2021), and the lack of adequate training for teachers on how to address these issues (Francis, 2024). Drawing on the transformative potential of the body as a pedagogical tool (hooks, 1994), I have come to recognise the power of my own unconventional and transgressive clothing choices in disrupting normative gender discourses and sparking critical conversations about gender and sexuality in the classroom. This approach resonates with scholarship on embodied pedagogy, such as Kostas' (2022) work on bodily performances in South African schools, Naser et al.'s (2020) research on queer visibility in US schools, and Harris et al.'s (2023) exploration of queer counterpublic spaces in Icelandic education. Collectively, this global body of work demonstrates how the physical presence of the educator can serve as a form of political resistance across diverse cultural contexts, while also revealing the culturally specific manifestations of this resistance.

Through this autoethnographic reflection, I aim to illuminate how my visible queerness – as embodied through my sartorial transgressions – functions as a catalyst for change, which challenges students to confront their assumptions about and biases towards gender and sexuality. By deliberately subverting traditional expectations of male professorial attire, such as wearing brightly coloured pants made from shweshwe fabric traditionally used for Tswana women's clothing, or donning a shawl typically

worn by women, I seek to create a space of "gender trouble" (Butler, 1999). In this space, the contingency and constructedness of binary norms are exposed, and alternative possibilities for identity and expression can emerge. The choice of shweshwe fabric is particularly significant in the South African context, as it carries complex historical and cultural meanings that intersect with questions of race, gender and identity. As Singh's (2024) and Githapradana et al.'s (2024) studies have shown, shweshwe is deeply entangled in complicated intersections of race, labour, empire, femininity and Black cultural practices, particularly in wedding ceremonies. The deployment of culturally specific materials in queer performance parallels practices documented in other postcolonial contexts, such as Doungphummes and Sangsingkeo's (2022) work on gender and sexual identities in Thailand and Allen's (2015) research on indigenous queer identities in New Zealand. These studies highlight the importance of examining how queer resistance mobilises and transforms local cultural symbols rather than simply importing Western models of LGBTQ+ identity and activism.

Similarly, the contemporary queer artist Siwa Mgoboza has incorporated shweshwe in their artwork as a means of troubling the fixed categories of identity and belonging (Clarke, 2024). By wearing shweshwe in ways that transgress its traditional gendered associations, I am not merely engaging in personal self-expression but rather participating in a broader project of denaturalising and reconfiguring cultural symbols that have historically been used to reinforce binary gender norms. My use of clothing as a pedagogical provocation is informed by scholars such as Msibi (2011) who argues that, in the South African context, "issues of sexual diversity have to be confronted openly, assertively and loudly" (p. 67) to challenge the pervasive culture of heteronormativity and homophobia. By embodying a queer aesthetic in the classroom, I aim to disrupt the "hidden curriculum" (Britzman, 1995) that reinforces heterosexuality as the norm and renders LGBTQ+ identities and experiences invisible or marginal. As hooks (1994) notes, "the body can be a site for transgressive teaching – a location for enacting insurgent black masculinity" (p. 113) and, in this case, I would argue, insurgent queer masculinity. This approach is also rooted in an understanding of the teacher's body as a site of both regulation and resistance (Foucault, 1978). As a gay male in academia, my very presence in the classroom serves as a form of "counter-conduct" (Ball, 2016) against the heteronormative disciplinary regimes that shape educational spaces.

This form of embodied resistance takes on particular significance in the South African context, where, as Msibi (2014) notes, the history of apartheid created specific racialised discourses about sexuality that continue to shape current educational practices. While similar forms of resistance have been documented in other regions – such as Ayoub and Paternotte's (2014) research on LGBT activism in Central and Eastern European educational institutions and Orozco et al.'s (2021) work on queer pedagogies in Latin American contexts – the interaction between post-apartheid politics, colonial legacies and sexuality in South Africa creates a distinctive environment for queer educational

activism that contributes valuable insights to global conversations about queer pedagogy.

By refusing to conform to the expected norms of gender presentation and sexual identity, I seek to expose the "relations of power that constitute subjects as gendered and sexualised beings" (Ngo, 2003, p. 116) and open up space for alternative ways of being and knowing. However, as scholars such as Ellsworth (1989) and Kopelson (2002) remind us, such transgressive embodiments must be deployed reflexively, lest they reinscribe the very power dynamics they seek to subvert. I am mindful of the risk that my visible queerness could be read as a form of "queer pedagogy as queerfare" (Allen, 2015), in which the spectacle of the queer body is commodified and consumed in ways that reify rather than challenge existing power relations. My use of unconventional clothing as a pedagogical tool is therefore not intended as a simplistic celebration of individual self-expression, but rather as a strategic intervention in the normative discourses and practices that shape teacher education in South Africa.

This strategic deployment of the queer body in educational spaces shares similarities with approaches documented by scholars in diverse national contexts, such as Kelleher's (2009) research on LGBTQ teachers in the United States, Ferfolja's (2014) work with lesbian teachers in Australia, and Cui's (2023) study of queer pedagogy in China. However, what distinguishes the South African case is how embodied queer resistance must navigate the particular tensions between constitutionally enshrined LGBTQ+ rights and deeply entrenched cultural and religious resistance to sexual diversity. This tension creates a pedagogical dynamic that is instructive for understanding how queer resistance operates in contexts characterised by similar contradictions between legal/policy frameworks and social attitudes. By embodying a queer aesthetic that blurs the boundaries of masculine and feminine, my aim is to denaturalise these binary constructs and model alternative ways of being and expressing oneself, while also engaging students in critical reflection on the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect with other axes of power and identity such as race, class and language. The examination of these complexities offers important insights for scholars and practitioners working in contexts where colonial legacies shape contemporary discourses about sexuality and gender, including parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Ultimately, my goal is to contribute to the development of a more inclusive and transformative approach to teacher education; one that not only prepares future educators to support LGBTQ+ learners but also challenges the heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions that underpin much of the current curriculum and pedagogy. Through a series of autoethnographic reflections, I will grapple with the complexities and contradictions of inhabiting a queer teacher identity in a context where such identities are often silenced, marginalised or stigmatised. Specifically, I will address the following research questions:

- How can the use of unconventional and transgressive clothing by a gay male professor serve to disrupt normative gender discourses and spark critical conversations about sexual and gender diversity in South African teacher education, and what implications does this have for similar efforts in diverse global contexts?
- What are the possibilities and limitations of using the body as a pedagogical tool for promoting inclusivity and social justice in higher education, particularly in the context of the power imbalances and institutional constraints that shape the teacher–student relationship across different cultural and political environments?

By engaging with these questions through the specific lens of South African teacher education while drawing connections to international scholarship and practice, I hope to contribute to the growing global body of scholarship on queer pedagogy and inclusive education, while also modelling a form of embodied, reflexive praxis that can inspire others to take up the challenge of creating more just and equitable learning environments across diverse national and cultural contexts.

Theoretical Framework

This article is grounded in an interdisciplinary framework that brings together insights from queer theory, critical race theory, feminist pedagogy and postcolonial studies to explore the transgressive potential of the teacher's body in the classroom. Central to my analysis is Foucault's (1978) concept of power as a productive force that circulates through social relations, rather than a top-down imposition. For Foucault, the body is a key site where disciplinary norms are inscribed and internalised, producing "docile bodies" that conform to dominant expectations. Yet, he also suggests that where there is power, there is always resistance, opening up possibilities for "counter-conduct" and alternative ways of being. Butler (1999) extends this notion of the body as a site of both regulation and subversion through her theory of gender performativity. By exposing the contingency and constructedness of gender norms, Butler argues, we can begin to resignify and transform them, by enacting what she calls "gender trouble". Butler's theory of performativity is particularly relevant to my analysis, as it provides a conceptual framework for understanding how my embodied presence in the classroom functions as a form of political intervention. When I stand before my students wearing shweshwe pants traditionally associated with Tswana women, I am deliberately disrupting the expected "stylised repetition of acts" that constitutes normative masculinity in the South African academic context. This disruption makes visible the constructedness of gender categories that are typically naturalised and taken for granted.

As Ellsworth (1989) reminds us, the emancipatory rhetoric of critical pedagogy often fails to reckon with the complexities of classroom power dynamics, particularly along lines of race and gender. She argues that calls for "empowerment" and "dialogue" can actually reinforce the authority of the teacher, which foreclose genuine student engagement and critique. Kopelson (2002) echoes this concern, and suggests that the imperative for queer teachers to "come out" in the classroom can sometimes backfire,

which leads students to dismiss their perspectives as biased or "pushing an agenda". Navigating these tensions requires what Gregory (2004) calls a "pedagogy of discomfort", where both teachers and students are willing to sit with the "painful possibility of coming to see one's former judgments as misguided or immoral" (p. 62). For Gregory, this process of self-examination is facilitated by the teacher's own vulnerability and self-disclosure, which can model the kind of intellectual and emotional risk-taking necessary for authentic learning and growth. At the same time, Rasmussen (2004) cautions against an uncritical embrace of "coming out" narratives in education, which can reify essentialist notions of identity and obscure the structural conditions that shape queer lives. She argues for a more nuanced understanding of the "spatiality" and "temporality" of coming out, which recognises that visibility is always partial, contingent and context specific.

These critiques of mainstream critical pedagogy and visibility politics not only take on particular significance in the South African context, but also have important implications for educational practice globally. As Msibi (2014) and Francis (2023) have documented, the risks and constraints of visibility for queer educators vary significantly across national and cultural contexts, which require context-sensitive approaches to pedagogical resistance. The South African experience – where constitutional protections create certain possibilities for visibility even as cultural resistance creates significant risks – offers an instructive case study for educators working in similarly contradictory contexts in Latin America (Orozco et al., 2021), Southeastern Europe (Brković et al., 2023) and parts of Asia (Kjaran & Kristinsdóttir, 2015) where legal protections may exist alongside powerful social stigma.

Disrupting Normative Discourses of Masculinity and Sexuality Through Embodied Transgression

As a Black male professor who identifies as gay in the context of South African higher education, I am acutely aware of the ways in which my embodied presence in the classroom transgresses normative expectations of masculinity and sexuality. In many Black South African cultures, as Ratele (2013) notes, masculinity is often rigidly defined and policed through markers of dress, expression and presentation. My deliberate use of unconventional clothing choices, such as brightly coloured shweshwe fabric pants traditionally associated with Tswana women's wear, thus serves as a visible disruption of these gendered norms. The incident that inspired the title of this article, "Are you really gay Prof?" occurred during a particularly memorable class discussion on gender and sexuality in education. After several weeks of teaching while wearing clothing that deliberately transgressed gender norms, a student raised their hand and asked this question directly, with a mix of curiosity and scepticism evident in their tone. The classroom fell silent, with many students visibly uncomfortable, and others leaning forward in anticipation of my response. This moment crystallised the tension between visibility and invisibility, between the performative aspects of identity and the deeper

questions of authenticity and belonging that underpin discussions of sexuality in the South African context.

This classroom interaction parallels similar moments documented by queer educators across diverse cultural contexts, such as Ferfolja's (2014) research with lesbian teachers in Australia, Mayo's (2022) work with queer-identifying teacher educators in the United States, and Cui's (2023) study of queer pedagogy in Taiwan. However, the particular manifestation of student curiosity, disbelief and discomfort in this South African classroom reveals specific cultural dynamics around sexuality and professional identity that differ from those reported in Northern contexts. As Francis (2022) and Msibi (2014) have documented, the post-apartheid educational environment creates unique conditions for queer visibility that are shaped by South Africa's particular history of racial segregation, constitutional transformation and ongoing cultural tensions regarding sexuality. When I responded by asking the class "What if I am gay?", their collective reactions exposed the deeply entrenched stereotypes of and misconceptions about gay identities and expressions. One student stated that I was "deviating from what is normative masculine clothing", which suggests a conflation of gender nonconformity with homosexuality, a common trope in heteronormative discourses (Swarr, 2012). Another student expressed surprise, saying they "never thought professors could be gay", which revealed the perceived incompatibility of queerness with professionalism and authority in academic settings. These responses demonstrate how clothing functions as more than mere self-expression; it operates as what Barthes (1990) called a "system of signs" that communicates social meanings and challenges established power relations.

The students' responses to my counter-question also revealed the complex intersection of race and sexuality in their perceptions. Several Black students expressed particular disbelief, with one commenting that "being gay is not part of our culture", which reflects the persistent myth that homosexuality is "unAfrican". As Francis (2023) has documented extensively in his work on queer activism in South African education, this rhetoric of homosexuality as a Western import creates additional challenges for Black queer educators who must navigate both homophobia and the erasure of queer African histories and identities. My embodied presence as a Black gay professor thus disrupts not only normative understandings of sexuality but also essentialist constructions of African cultural authenticity.

More troubling is the students' incredulity at the idea of a gay professor, which points to the perceived incompatibility of queerness with professionalism and authority. As Bhana (2014) observes, in South African schools, the normalisation of heterosexuality is a powerful discourse that marginalises alternate sexualities. The presumption that gay lives are divorced from academic and professional spheres reinforces the notion of heterosexuality as the "natural" and default state of being (Msibi, 2011). This invisibility and marginalisation of queer identities in educational spaces have dire consequences for LGBTQ+ learners and educators. By embodying and asserting my

identity as a gay academic, I aim to challenge these limiting discourses and provide an alternative model of possibility for my students.

As Kiguwa and Langa (2017) argue, "coming out" in the classroom can serve as a form of resistance and a "politics of visibility" that trouble the heteronormative status quo (p. 8). Francis (2022) argues for the importance of embodied resistance to cisgender and heteronormative norms in educational spaces as a means of creating more inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ learners and educators. This emphasis on visibility politics has been central to global LGBTQ+ educational activism, as documented by scholars such as Mayo (2022) in the United States and Ferfolja (2014). However, the risks and rewards of visibility vary significantly across national and cultural contexts. As Rasmussen (2004) and Kopelson (2002) have argued from Western perspectives, and as Msibi (2014) have documented in South African contexts, visibility politics are always contingent on local power dynamics and can sometimes reinforce rather than challenge normative assumptions. The South African case is particularly instructive because of how visibility operates in a context where constitutional protections create certain possibilities that may not exist in more restrictive environments, yet cultural resistance creates specific challenges that differ from those in more socially progressive contexts.

Yet, as the students' comments about my masculinity reveal, this visibility is not without risks. The statement "I don't express and look like a gay man apart from my clothing" suggests that my gender presentation is read as inconsistent with dominant stereotypes of gay male effeminacy (Reddy, 2006). This reaction speaks to the ways in which queer identities are often narrowly defined and regulated, even in LGBTQ+ communities. The question "Am I really gay?" further underscores the scepticism and even hostility with which non-normative sexual and gender expressions are met. As Butler (1999) argues, the performative nature of identity means that "the 'reality' of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and the ground of all imitations" (p. 138). In other words, the students' disbelief in the authenticity of my gay identity stems from a naturalised view of heterosexuality as the original and "real" state of being, against which all other identities are measured and found wanting.

The intersection of my Black and queer identities adds another layer of complexity to this dynamic. As a Black gay man in South Africa, my embodied presence challenges not only heteronormative assumptions but also racialised constructions of authentic Blackness that often exclude queer identities. The question "Are you really gay Prof?" thus carries a double meaning, implicitly asking "How can you be both authentically Black and gay?" This intersection of racialised and sexualised identities has been explored by scholars across diverse postcolonial contexts, including Johnson's (2010) work on queer Filipino identities, Livermon's (2012) research on Black queer visibility in South African popular culture, and Allen's (2015) study of indigenous queer identities in New Zealand. The South African educational context offers particularly

valuable insights for international scholars because of how racial, sexual and professional identities intersect in a society undergoing rapid social transformation. As Bhana (2014), Msibi (2014) and Francis (2022) have all noted, South African educational spaces become sites where competing discourses about authentic Blackness, professional authority and sexual identity are negotiated in ways that can inform our understanding of similar dynamics in other postcolonial contexts globally.

Confronting and deconstructing these ingrained assumptions requires more than individual acts of transgression, but a sustained commitment to queer pedagogy and praxis. As Kumashiro (2002) notes, this involves not only addressing overt forms of oppression but also interrogating the "the everyday practices and assumptions in schools (and in society) that privilege certain identities and marginalize others" (p. 32). By embodying my queer identity in the classroom, I seek to denaturalise these everyday practices and assumptions, and to make visible the often-invisible workings of heteronormativity. However, as Ellsworth (1989) cautions, such practices of visibility and "coming out" in the classroom are not without their limitations and potential pitfalls. There is a risk that my own identity and experiences as a gay male academic may be taken as representative of all queer lives, which obscure the diversity and complexity in LGBTQ+ communities. As a male professor, I occupy a position of relative power and privilege in relation to my students, which may make it difficult for them to openly challenge or critique my perspectives (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017). Navigating these tensions requires ongoing reflexivity and a willingness to engage in the kind of "pedagogy of discomfort" that Zembylas (2015) advocates, one that "invites students to move beyond their 'comfort zones'" and critically examine their own complicity in oppressive systems (p. 163).

It is a daunting task, but one that is essential if we are to create truly inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students, regardless of their sexual or gender identity. Through my embodied transgression of normative discourses of masculinity and sexuality, I aim to open spaces for critical dialogue and reflection on the complex intersections of identity, power and pedagogy. While this work is fraught with challenges and contradictions, it is also imbued with the possibility of transformation – of ourselves, our students and the educational institutions we inhabit. By embracing the discomfort and vulnerability that comes with being fully present in the classroom as a queer educator, I hope to inspire others to take up the call of creating a more just and liberatory praxis, not only in South Africa but also across diverse global contexts where similar struggles for recognition and inclusion continue.

Conclusion

In this autoethnographic essay, I have sought to critically reflect on my experiences as a gay Black male professor in the context of South African teacher education, using my embodied presence and transgressive self-presentation as a lens through which to explore the possibilities and limitations of queer pedagogies for social justice. I have

argued that the deliberate subversion of heteronormative and cisnormative expectations of gender and sexuality in the classroom can serve as a powerful tool for disrupting oppressive norms and assumptions, which creates space for alternative ways of knowing and being. However, I have also sought to highlight the complex power dynamics and institutional constraints that shape the pedagogical encounter, particularly in a context such as South Africa in which LGBTQ+ identities remain stigmatised and marginalised. As scholars such as Ellsworth (1989) and Kopelson (2002) have noted, transgressive pedagogies that centre the teacher's body and identity can risk reinscribing hierarchies and provoking student resistance, particularly when not approached with care and reflexivity. The burden of hypervisibility and vulnerability that often falls on queer and other marginalised educators can be emotionally and professionally taxing, and risks reducing the complexity and diversity of LGBTQ+ lives to a single, essentialised narrative. Nonetheless, I believe that autoethnographic reflections like mine can play a valuable role in enriching and complicating ongoing conversations about queer pedagogies and social justice education. By vulnerably sharing their own stories and experiences, queer educators can help to resist the silencing and erasure of LGBTQ+ lives in academia.

Moving forward, it is clear that there is still much work to be done in creating truly inclusive and equitable learning environments for all students in South African higher education, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. This will require a multifaceted approach that includes not only the transgressive efforts of individual educators, but also systemic changes at the level of policy, curriculum and institutional culture. Some potential avenues for further research and praxis might include:

- Developing and implementing comprehensive diversity and inclusion training for all higher education staff and faculty, with a specific focus on LGBTQ+ identities and experiences. This would involve creating curricula that address the intersection of sexuality, gender, race and other aspects of identity, while also providing practical strategies for promoting inclusion in diverse educational contexts.
- Revisiting and revising existing curricula and pedagogical practices through a queer and decolonial lens, which centres the knowledge and perspectives of marginalised communities. This would entail critically examining how current educational materials and approaches may reproduce heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions, and developing alternative frameworks that acknowledge and celebrate diversity. Following Butler's (1999) theory of performativity, this process would involve denaturalising binary gender categories and creating space for alternative ways of understanding and expressing gender and sexuality.
- Fostering greater collaboration and solidarity among LGBTQ+ students, staff and allies on campuses, and working to build stronger connections with queer activist networks and community organisations.
- Advocating more robust institutional policies and support structures to protect and affirm LGBTQ+ students and staff, such as anti-discrimination measures, gender-neutral facilities and targeted mental health resources. Building on the constitutional

protections for LGBTQ+ rights in South Africa, educational institutions should develop comprehensive policies that address the specific needs and concerns of sexual and gender minorities.
- Actively cultivating alternative visions of education as a site of radical possibility and transformation through sustained dialogue, creative pedagogy and collaborative action. This involves reimagining educational spaces as sites where diverse identities and expressions are not merely tolerated but celebrated as essential components of a vibrant learning community.

Ultimately, the goal of queer and other transgressive pedagogies in the South African context must be not only to challenge oppressive norms and assumptions, but also to actively cultivate alternative visions of education as a site of radical possibility and transformation. This will require ongoing critical reflection, dialogue and action from all members of the academic community, as well as a deep commitment to social justice and solidarity across difference. As a queer Black educator, I remain hopeful that by vulnerably sharing my own experiences and perspectives, I can contribute in some small way to this larger project of building a more liberatory and inclusive future for higher education in South Africa and beyond.

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