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# Borders – Workshop Proposal

# Traversing the Borderline: Student Identity and the Challenge of “Normative Value” Schools

In the adolescent phase of childhood development, children begin to explore and negotiate their own identities. This timing often coincides with their high school years, an environment that exerts much influence over how those identities are shaped and against what mould these identities are gilded. “Normative values” relate to legacy hierarchical power structures, most often patriarchal in nature, with a discourse or pedagogy of conservatism. Religious affiliate schools, single-sex schools, and heritage school often hold these normative values. These institutions often have a clear set of values and principles that dictate the boundaries within which identity may be explored. Identities that fall outside of that boundary are policed, either by the institution itself, the faculty, or by fellow members of the student body.

What makes this situation complex, is that the interests of the child are often not respected and protected above all other competing interest. Instead, diverse student interests are weighed against the supposed interests of other students, the interest of the students’ parents, the interest of alumni and funders, and the interest of the reputation of that institution, which directly impacts the longevity of that institution. Resultantly, the encouragement to develop diverse identities, a derogation from these “normative values”, is often seen as too “risky” and thus stifled and policed in favour of these competing interests.

This policing of diverse identities has dire consequences on both the mental and physical health of these students. Impacting their self-confidence, mental health, their own self-valuation, their ability to fully participate and therefore succeed within that space and their prospects of their own future success. Furthermore, students who may buy into these normative values are robbed of the opportunity of being exposed to difference from a young age, thus stifling their ability to formulate different attitudes toward diverse individuals and thus their ability to engage with them. Overall, these “old school” values create a lose-lose situation for all the students involved and thus require intervention.

**South Africa, 2016 saw a tectonic shift in the discourse around diverse identities and their relationships to schools promoting “normative values”.** In August 2016, a group of young black female students at one of these normative value schools rose in protest against the school’s hair policy. This longstanding policy both explicitly and implicitly denied black female students the right to explore, promote and embrace their cultural and racial identities, expressed by their hair, under the guise of “neat and tidy”. After student protest, and the eventual intervention by government and civil society, the policy was amended to accommodate the expression of black female hair identities, but at a price to both the student body and the reputation of the school.

The clash between diverse identities and normative value schools is, however, a global and ever-present issue: homosexuality, transgender identities and diverse religious views in religious affiliate schools and the promotion of traditional masculine architype in male single-sex schools, to name but a few.

**The aim of this workshop** is to explore the impact that “normative value” education institutions have on the development of diverse identities for students, the subsequent impact on diverse students’ performance and the impact on students who may subscribe to these normative values but denied the opportunity to be exposed to diversity. Further, this workshop aims to explore possible strategies that may be implemented to reconcile how these schools can encourage diverse identities while balancing the normative values they hold. This workshop aims to allow participants the opportunity to engage in dialogue around the complexities that many of these institutions face in relation to the competing interests of their multiple stakeholders. Participants will discuss whether normative value schools should be forced, through legislation and other means, to encourage diverse identities irrespective of their own values held and the interest of their stakeholders. Finally, participants will discuss how civil society, advocacy groups and student leaders can both support schools and their students in negotiating these complex spaces and competing interests.

**Workshop format:** the organiser will give an overview presentation of work he has done in normative value institutions in relation to identity and balancing the competing interests of students, parents, faculty, policy and alumni. Research will be presented to the participants on the effects of supressed identities on the wellbeing of students at schools, as well as the effect of non-exposure to diversity for students who may subscribe to these normative values.

**Participant interaction:** workshop participants will then break into smaller groups to discuss the questions posed above. Groups will be asked to critically evaluate the problem and context at hand and to discuss potential practical solutions to achieving a more balanced and positive scenario for all students and schools.

**Plenary:** returning to the plenary, discussion will continue as to whether the border between identity and normative values should be broken down, and if so, what the best strategy to do this is. Should consensus rally around the safeguarding of that border however, a discussion on best practice for building, initiating and running support and intervention programmes for students within these spaces shall be explored.

**Workshop Organisers:**

Roy J Gluckman – [royjgluckman@gmail.com](mailto:royjgluckman@gmail.com) – is a qualified attorney of the High Court of South Africa, a facilitator, mediator and professional speaker on issues of equality, diversity and inclusion. Based in South Africa, Roy has developed numerous programmes, interventions and workshops to bring difficult discussions around race, gender, sexuality and other diversity dimensions into traditionally conservative spaces in the hopes of facilitating meaningful engagements, transformation and social cohesion. Roy Gluckman is also the founder and director of Cohesion Collective, an organisation established to promote social cohesion and inclusive thinking in both the private and public sectors. To date, Roy has worked with numerous businesses and schools to both encourage and support the effective and sustainable rollout of inclusive initiatives in the hopes of creating a more empathetic, engaged and committed generation.