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# Introduction: Queering Education

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## *Introduction*

# Queering Education: Pedagogy, Curriculum, Policy

*Darla Linville, Guest Editor*

Over the last two decades, much has changed for people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer (LGBTQ+), and for others who don't identify with these terms but fall somewhere outside of heterosexuality or binary gender. During this time, legal protections for and recognition of LGBTQ+ people have grown, including civil unions, first in Vermont in 2000; then same-sex marriage in Massachusetts in 2004 and in all states in 2015; the striking down of sodomy laws in 2003; and the recognition of LGBT people by the military, including full equality in benefits; and in late 2016, the lift of the ban on transgender in the military. There are now more civil rights protections for LGBT employees in more states, and protections for students in schools.

These changes have been widely understood as progress or advances, and as improving the lives of LGBTQ adults and children, as well as of the children who live with LGBTQ adults or those perceived as not conforming to gender expectations. Those of us who work to make schools more welcoming places for LGBTQ+ youth have celebrated these victories, even while continuing to push schools and society to do more to decenter heteronormativity and the gender binary and make schools safer places for all students.

At the same time, many people have questions about these achievements. Some resist the normativity of legal gains that give LGBTQ+ people access to problematic institutions such as marriage and the military. The conservative nature of these institutions, the gender norms embedded in them, and the ways they work to uphold other systems of oppression along class and race lines defy the goals of reformers concerned with creating a more just society for all. Those who ask these questions push people who identify as LGBTQ+ to remain queer, in the sense of not being normalized within conservative and conforming institutions.

There is also resistance from more conservative people on the political spectrum who are concerned that the social and legal changes allowing acceptance and acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ people are

moving too fast. Some of these resisters believe that schools should not have to change to make LGBTQ+ students more comfortable, that accepting LGBTQ+ people is an endorsement of an immoral way of living, and that the best approach would be to encourage children not to be LGBTQ+. Therefore, at the same time that some legal protections for LGBTQ+ people have been won, these gains remain tenuous and contested.

The call for proposals for this special issue of the Occasional Paper Series (OPS) was conceived in a moment of possibility and hope among advocates for LGBTQ+ youth during the summer of 2015, when the Supreme Court had just decided the case that allowed same-sex marriage to be recognized in all 50 states and at the federal level. This move led LGBTQ+ people, especially those in more conservative regions of the country or outside of large urban areas, to believe that they could call on legal powers to protect their families, jobs, housing, or relationships. They hoped that the random, bureaucratic violence and harassment they sometimes encountered might be avoided. And they looked forward to proudly announcing their existence, knowing that they could not be legally turned away. The OPS Call for Papers asked authors to imagine what might happen in schools now if a basic legal acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ equality was written into law.

What might it mean to make education more queer? Queerness is not a unitary identity (as is no identity) and queer is not a single way of thinking or being. Sometimes queer is opposition to outness, or resistance to acceptance, and exists in order to disrupt and discomfit. This, too, is queer. How might educators work to make schools more welcoming of queer bodies and identifications, queer the binary categories that define social life, and disrupt the differential privileging of those who claim normative identities?

## **Queering Education**

Ten years ago I wrote:

How does queer theory help explain the narratives of high school students, both LGBTQ and heterosexual-identified, and the contradictions and counter-narratives they expose in the policies, practices, and pedagogies of their schools? Do queer theory's prescriptions resonate with students' wishes for their schools? [Is there] a "best way" for schools to make their hallways and classrooms more welcoming environments for LGBTQ students? (Linville, 2008)

Then, as now, educational researchers and theorists wrote about ways that queer theory could change educational practices, including curriculum, pedagogy, and structures of schools (Bertram, Crowley, & Massey, 2010; Birden, 2005; Driver, 2007, 2008; Killoran & Pendleton Jimenez, 2007; Rasmussen, 2006; Smith, 2005). These articles, books, dissertations, and curricula wanted to change the discussion about queer possibilities in schools: exploding binary categories; telling stories with un-foreclosed endings; questioning simplistic morality, psychology, or biology; promoting contested conversations (Banks & Alexander, 2016).

These ideas don't mesh well with demands for standardization, high-stakes assessment, or even zero-tolerance bullying mandates. Those of us engaged in social justice conversations must ask for experimentation, openness, and unclear lines amid concerns about queer desire and contested truths (Ruffalo, 2007). This is particularly true in the elementary grades, where gendered behavior organizes demarcations of proper and improper, damaged and healthy, and within/without. If we are charged with teaching students correct sexualized and gendered behavior with one another, if we must address their actions in their bodies, how can we do that without boxing them into limiting categories that reify binaries and ideas about normal and deviant (Boas, 2012)?

Queer theory (Rodriguez & Pinar, 2007; Rasmussen, Rofes, & Talburt, 2004; Talburt & Steinberg, 2000), in conjunction with feminist theory and pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, critical race theories, and critical disability studies, has demanded that educational theorists and researchers reframe their questions away from deficits in students to look at structural impediments that keep students from succeeding, "attending to the conditions that allow normalcy its hold" (Britzman, 2000).

These demands have required that schools, society, and teachers rethink the category "deserving student" and restructure the social and academic atmosphere of educational institutions to be accessible to all students. Queer theorists have demanded that education discuss and encourage learning about those who are oppressed for who they are perceived to be, regardless of their own identifications, and that education acknowledge the categorization of identities created by traditional curriculum and pedagogical practices (Kumashiro, 2001).

Queer theory asks educators to consider desire as a force that compels us to acquire knowledge and engage with others. It drives us to know and connect with one another, with ideas, and with the complexity of the unknown and unknowable (Britzman, 2000). Recognizing the contingency of knowledge and the artificiality of epistemological categories, queer theorists, along with poststructuralists more generally,

hold that what is known and what can be known is limited to the society within which we live. Binaries appear normal and natural when they are in fact constructed and context-specific. The authors in this special issue of Bank Street's Occasional Paper Series have taken up these queer ideas in ways that let us view classrooms and curriculum through new lenses. By asking us to question what is taken for granted, natural, and normal, they ask us to see new possibilities and potentialities for ourselves and our students.

## **The Transformative Potential of Love**

Looking beyond what is expected, attending to the needs and desires of the present interaction, and challenging traditions that limit access to educational experiences are common elements of Benjamin Lee Hicks' and Denise Snyder's essays. Bookending the issue, these authors invite us to remember the very personal stories of the children and adults inhabiting the roles of teacher, student, parent, and administrator working for educational justice.

In these essays, trans bodies confound schools because of the ways that schools are organized by gendered categories. In order to use bathrooms, take certain classes, register for events, be placed in rooms for overnight trips, get invited to parties, and sign up for graduation, one must be assigned to a gender, and preferably one that conforms to one's body parts. This match, and the possibility that others may detect some unexpected combination, can leave a student or teacher feeling unwelcome.

As both Hicks and Snyder point out, gender is in some ways the most minor and inconsequential of things to know about a person. If we can look past that—to interests, pains, and joys—and form relationships with one another not predicated on gender, then we can engage more meaningfully with one another. Although gender is woven into the fabric of schools, if we can imagine organizing students without drawing on gender we can begin to create more welcoming environments for more bodies. As a side benefit, we may stop a significant part of gender-based sexual harassment and bullying.

## **Creating Dangerous Queer Bodies in Schools**

Three authors in this OPS issue take on the specter of the dangerous queer body in schools and the ways that the real experiences of students defy the simplified categories of good/bad, in/out, right/wrong that school discipline policies and regulations expect. They examine the ways that the queer body is welcomed and hidden in schools, the ghostly appearance of the birth name that haunts trans

students, and the complexity of intersectional identities that make queer youth susceptible to racism, classism, and school policing. In these essays we see that school administrators, teachers, teacher candidates, and community members may be challenged to understand the best ways to teach and discipline when queer bodies show up in schools.

All the authors encourage readers to view the situation through multiple perspectives. We are able to see the impact of the policy regulation or rule and hear the perspective of the person whose experience is denied, overlooked, or invalidated through the normative expectations of the school. What is dangerous about these LGBTQ+ bodies is that they deny us the possibility of making easy, definitive statements about what will be right for all students in this situation. They demand that we see students as individuals with complex identifications, differing needs and wants, and differing desires for education.

The stories depicted in these essays say that we need to listen to parents, students, and teachers when they say that the solution proposed by the policy does not meet their needs, and that they would like the school community to respond in a different way. As Stearns suggests, listening may lead to conflict that we need to resolve or learn to live with.

## **Telling Queer Stories/Queering Straight Stories**

The remaining three essays in this OPS issue talk about stories that include queer and trans lives as they are represented in teaching materials or recreational reading for students. Although there is some research in this area, these papers offer new readings of stories, with audiences that we don't always think of when we think of queer and trans storylines, and with connections to popular culture and the Common Core State Standards.

These essays offer important lessons in adding elements of queer (including queering binary gender) into existing curriculum and classroom practices at all levels of education. Rather than recommending waiting until the political climate is receptive to overturning normative structures in schools, these essays promote using subversion in small doses, in ways that plant seeds of doubt about certainties and fixed categories.

Many of the texts presented in this section offer opportunities for more normative readings, as well as for more queered readings. These opportunities are pointed out by the authors as ways to invite readers

into the texts and then move them to queerer reading/interpreting possibilities. The categories of texts presented by Lin and the statistics provided by Sullivan and Urraro provide critical lenses through which to view the stories presented to young children, as well as a guide for examining new texts that offer representations of LGBTQ+ lives.

Sweet and Carlson [link] queer ideas about creating curriculum by asking writers for the television show, *Transparent*, produced by Amazon, to suggest scenes that would make for engaging curriculum. This outside sourcing of curriculum ideas, from creators of a public curricular medium (television), upends expectations. Using Miller's Queer Literacy Framework (2016), Sweet and Carlson ground the lessons in queer readings of the scenes, and also in the Common Core State Standards for high school English.

## Queering Practices

LGBTQ+ bodies and stories still appear strange and frightening in many places in the United States, and especially in elementary classrooms. There are regions where prayers are recited over the loudspeaker, religious groups organize the afterschool programming, and prom is for boy/girl couples only. In these places, mentioning the word queer induces shudders and alarm: queer is a bad word, and nothing good can come from mentioning it.

At the same time, teachers in many parts of the U.S. and other nations are comfortable and confident about welcoming queer and trans youth and/or parents into their classrooms, and queer and trans teachers are finding ways to speak about their identities and existence in relation to their professional lives. Knowledge, awareness, and welcome have grown since the 1990s, when a scandal was created by the Rainbow Curriculum in New York City and the inclusion of *Heather Has Two Mommies* in elementary reading materials (Casper, Curraro, Schultz, Silin, & Wilkens, 1996).

In the changed landscape since the 2016 election, now we are awaiting the effects of the new Secretary of Education, as it has been announced that she and the new Attorney General Jeff Sessions would like to remove all protections for transgender people, including in schools. The campaign of the U.S. president gave voice to hate directed at groups for their identities, including race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, national origin, and religion. There is newly encouraged resistance to queerness and a new insistence on normative structures. Whiteness, Christianity, masculinity (and the right to dominate/use women's bodies), heterosexuality, gender normativity and roles, ability—physical normativity that

discounts contributions of those who are differently abled—are all receiving the message that they deserve the privilege they have received in the past. Conversations about contesting unearned privilege are framed as unrealistic, frivolous whining.

By contrast, these essays are queer in the broadest sense, offering visions of love and hope. Queer that reminds us to keep looking at what voices from other perspectives tell us, to keep interrogating what we work toward (inclusion, hospitality, welcome, representation, awareness). We also question what those representations and access points reify and foreclose. All of the essays offer practical visions of what can happen in classrooms, and lead the way toward more queerness in education.



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