Constructing Queer Knowledge in Educational Contexts: An Introduction

by
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Lawrence King. Carl Walker-Hoover. Eric Mohat. Jaheem Herrera. These are the names of boys who lost their lives as a result of bullying in just a little over one year's time between February, 2008 and April, 2009. But this was not just ordinary bullying; these boys were bullied because they were either openly gay or perceived as gay by their classmates. In Lawrence's case, he was murdered by one of his bullies just before Valentine's Day in 2008. Carl, Eric, and Jaheem were bullied to such extremes that they felt the only way to end their suffering was by taking their own lives. Some have the misconception that queer youth are no longer persecuted like in the past; after all, queer characters appear in many popular television shows (e.g., *Brothers & Sisters*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Gossip Girl*, *Glee*, *Modern Family, Ugly Betty*). If queer characters were indicative of society being as accepting as many believe, why, then, are our youth at such risk?

In reflecting on these tragedies, as well as in selecting a direction for this special issue, we began to question just how far we have come in terms of queer scholarship. We decided, in light of this question, that it was appropriate to critically examine how queer knowledge has been constructed in the past, how this knowledge is currently constructed, and, finally, how such knowledge might be constructed in the future. Most queer knowledge, as it pertains to the educational milieu, is disseminated through special journal issues or books devoted to specific areas (e.g., queer teacher or student identity, the plight of queer youth in school, and so forth), as well as individual papers that end up in print through the typical channels of acceptance in academic journals. However, by examining queer knowledge from the past, present, and future, as we do here, this particular special issue brings together a number of specific areas of queer knowledge, affording the reader the opportunity to make connections across these topics.

In many instances, queer knowledge has evolved over the last few decades, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. For example, Trenchard and Warren (1984) found that during the early to mid-'80s in the United Kingdom, there was very little mention of homosexuality in school. However, in a replication of this study, Ellis and High (2004) found nearly two decades later that there was more reference to topics of homosexuality in school. Despite the increase in talk of queer issues at school, more of these discussions were viewed by the students as unhelpful. Additionally, Ellis and High found that queer students also experienced increased "trouble" (e.g., isolation, verbal and physical abuse, teasing, and so forth). Ellis and High suggest that a reason for the significant increase in negative experiences may be that although there are greater numbers of discussions taking place at school, more of these discussions are actually reinforcing the marginalization of queer youth, or worse, teachers are using these discussions as a means for promoting the idea that homosexuality is wrong. In some cases, studies have reported that teachers have done more than marginalize queer youth; they have been active participants in promoting homophobic hatred toward this "silent minority" (Uribe, 1994) by making homophobic comments to queer students and telling homophobic jokes in class (Elze, 2003; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008).

The marginalization of queer youth is further exacerbated by the attitudes and actions of their peers. For example, the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), has found in their bi-annual national survey in the United States that the use of "words that wound" (Applebaum, 2003), such as "faggot" or "dyke," are heard as much today as they were nearly one decade ago when GLSEN first launched their study (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008). Perhaps worse than the words are the frequent reports of physical harassment (pushing and shoving) and assault with weapons, in addition to theft, vandalism, vicious rumors, and cyberbullying (Lock, 2002; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008). Current statistics suggest that like name calling, the frequency of physical abuse against queer youth has increased, rather than decreased, over the past decade. Despite the increase in verbal and physical abuse, many students choose not to report such incidences to school officials or parents (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008; Reis & Saewyc, 1999). On a more positive note, just within the past decade, queer youth have reported an increase in the ability to find at least one supportive teacher or administrator at school (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008).

An important question, however, remains: Is this enough to say that we have made progress? This collection of articles will reveal that queering education has been and continues to be a struggle in many situations, including queer youth and college students of color, in a variety of global settings. Some of the contributors to this special issue also offer hope, whether it has been realized in present day, or is on the horizon for the very near future. Others suggest that there is still much work to be done in order to achieve the goals for which we all are striving. It is safe to assume that we have not yet achieved the ultimate goal in

queering education to our satisfaction, yet this special issue will bring to light the progress that has been achieved and the direction in which we need to head for the future.

Queer Knowledge Constructed in Past, Present, and Future

Koschoreck, Meek, Campanello, and Mominee offer readers the opportunity to explore what scholarly queer activism is and to engage with the authors in discovering how such activism informs their pedagogy, as well as how their pedagogy informs their activism. Koschoreck describes how he transitioned from a career in accounting to the world of academe, and in that process discovered that he could "contribute to the growing bodies of knowledge in education" as he explored others' work that would later guide his own scholarship and his activism as a queer scholar.

Meek forces the reader to reconsider the term *queer* by problematizing the term through a number of important questions: 1) What counts as a queer topic? ; 2) Is a queer topic limited to LGBTIQ subjects? ; 3) Can the word queer also refer to the deconstruction of binaries and social norms? She suggests that attempting to define the word queer is in and of itself problematic. Instead, she posits that, "To queer is to highlight the unstable and multivalent nature of identity, language, culture, community," and she charges scholars to "envision another strategy or framework that would serve more people and lessen or even eliminate the policing of identity boundaries." Such discussions as this represent how queer knowledge has evolved and perhaps the direction that future scholarship might take. Additionally, we would like to add to this discussion by noting that we chose to use the term queer for this special issue for very similar reasons as Meek describes. Using the word queer affords scholars the possibility of avoiding identity boundaries that expressions such as LGBTIQ otherwise impose on queer scholarship.

Campanello and Mominee offer the reader two views on pedagogy. Campanello's description is an interesting and provocative perspective on the interaction between scholarship and activism by personifying them, and noting that "these two kids are anything but (hetero/homo)-normative, since, like the heterogeneous practices of queer sex, the tools *and* the trade *mean* things and *do* things heterogeneously and co-constitutively in time and space." She further shares with the reader how she views her pedagogy as giving "space to an articulation of what 'ought to be.'" Mominee focuses on putting theory into practice by describing how he has benefited from the privileges of his background, and how he has taken his newly found understanding through his "unlearning" and implemented it in his own teaching.

In the second section of their article, Koschoreck, Meek, Campanello, and Mominee rethink their ideas on queer activism in light of the views of their co-authors from the first section. In their writing of the second section, they invite

the reader to consider each author's view not as isolated, but as interconnected to the other three. The four authors demonstrate how queer scholarship is about dialogue, and about using that dialogue to continuously re-inform our way of thinking.

We are delighted to include Misawa's work, entitled "Queer Race Pedagogy for Educators in Higher Education: Dealing with Power Dynamics and Positionality of LGBTQ Students of Color" in this special issue. In addition to providing an important discussion on positionality, and its connection to how we are identified by society, he addresses the intersection of racism and homophobia, and in particular, issues of those who are "doubly oppressed" in the higher education setting. In order to address the double oppression that queer persons of color experience in higher education, Misawa proposes his approach to the problem: Queer Race Pedagogy (QRP), which he developed from putting Critical Race Theory and Queer Theory into practice. He suggests that QRP requires two pedagogical activities: counterstorytelling and critical examination/thinking of stereotypes. Although QRP was designed for queer persons of color in higher education "who have traditionally been ignored and overlooked by mainstream discourses in higher education," there is also potential for QRP in promoting anti-oppressive education for all students. Activities of counterstorytelling and critical examination of stereotypes could prove helpful in achieving an educational environment that is designed for all students, whether queer or straight, white or of color, K-12 learners or college students.

Jackson's contribution to this special issue, "'How do you spell homosexual?' Naturally Queer Moments in K-12 Classrooms," provides an interesting view of where we presently stand in terms of queer curriculum in school. Although most would agree that we are far from living in a "post-gay" world (see Collard, 1998), where being queer is no longer an "other," laced with hatred, fear, and marginalization, Jackson shares with the reader examples in the classroom where "queerness becomes a part of the fabric of the curriculum instead of a focal point; in other words, moments when students take no particular notice of it." She calls these "naturally queer moments." The powerful stories that are told through Jackson's writing give hope that maybe one day in the future, our classrooms will become "post-gay."

In "Queer Bodies, Afrocentric Reform and Masculine Anxiety," McCready addresses the "often misunderstood, ignored, and assaulted" black gay and gender non-conforming youth of urban schools. He maintains that in order to reach this particular group of disenfranchised youth, urban educators must discontinue viewing them through stereotypical lenses and begin to see them as "pedagogical," where the youth teach the educators about the effects that traditional stereotypes have on their lives and on their schooling. McCready achieves this with powerful ethnographic stories of youth that were part of a dance troupe. These stories reveal that, although Afrocentric curriculum and pedagogy "aims to de-

center Whiteness," heteronormative and masculine hegemony is simultaneously ignored. The result is that students like Kevin and Antoine have compromised self-esteem and self-worth.

Goldstein has contributed to this special issue with an approach that is not yet common practice in scholarly work, presenting her research through performative ethnography. In this case, she presents a play based on an ethnographic study of anti-homophobic education in several schools in Canada. Goldstein describes how this play challenges pre- and in-service teachers to examine their own attitudes and beliefs about queer youth, and in these introspective exercises, she is able "to provoke a shifting of positions to anti-homophobia education" with some of her students. Approaching queer issues that are often not received positively in teacher education programs with new methods, such as performative ethnography, perhaps such methods will spark a greater change in the homophobic attitudes that continue to pervade the hallways and classrooms of our schools.

School violence, particularly bullying, has been a problem in schools for decades. However, in the 21st century, as Blumenfeld and Cooper discuss in their article, "LGBT and Allied Youth Responses to Cyberbullying: Policy Implications," modern technology has made it possible to bully students from anywhere, whether it be at school, at home, at the mall, or even at the beach. Blumenfeld and Cooper took on a national survey to examine how cyberbullying has affected the lives of queer youth, and in particular, this article focuses on issues of reporting cases of bullying, as well as students' views on how to put an end to cyberbullying. Based on the premise that bullying involves more than those who bully and those who are bullied, Blumenfeld and Cooper explore possibilities of empowering those who are impacted by cyberbullying, and in particular Social Norms Theory. They conclude that whether it is in establishing or reforming school policy to address issues of bullying or any other marginalization of youth, "listening to and truly hearing the voices of youth in developing effective strategies is paramount...."

This special issue concludes with "Retracing Queer Moments: Drawing a Comparison Between Past and Present GLBTQ Issues," where Endo and Reece-Miller reflect on their experiences as two gay male products of the early '70s, one born and raised in Japan and the other in the Midwest of the USA. Though their experiences are quite different on the surface, a more critical examination reveals that there are, in fact, several similarities between the two, namely that both endured an education that did not welcome sexual diversity, and made the K-12 experience a hostile environment for anyone deviating from heteronormative expectation. Endo and Reece-Miller compare their experiences in school with the current situation in school. Although there is a more open visibility of queer youth in school, ultimately there appears to be little improvement since Endo and Reece-Miller were in school.

Where Are We Now and Where Are We Headed?

In reflecting on the contributions to this special issue, it is clear that queer knowledge has evolved over last few decades. First and foremost, the mere ability for this diverse group of scholars to come together to present this wide array of topics to create a special issue that addresses queer issues is indicative of this change. Endo and Reece-Miller describe how school was not a safe space for queer individuals several decades ago. And in more recent years, McCready depicts a grim picture for queer and gender non-conforming black youth. Blumenfeld and Cooper have also reminded us that bullying is still prevalent in school, and queer youth are at particular risk for being the brunt of the bullying. However, as Jackson discussed, perhaps there are increasingly more examples of "naturally queer moments" surfacing in schools?

Clearly, the evidence suggests that there are not enough of these moments to even begin to believe that we are now living in a "post-gay" world. But can we see it on the horizon? Perhaps we can. Misawa shares with us a solution for tackling racist, homophobic higher education with his Queer Race Pedagogy. Koschoreck, Meek, Campanello, and Mominee dialogue about scholarship informing activism, and Blumenfeld and Cooper discuss Social Norms Theory influencing possible solution to cyberbullying. And Goldstein describes how her use of performative ethnography is used to challenge homophobic thinking among pre- and in-service teachers.

So where do we go from here in an effort to achieve a "post-gay" world in education? Vicars (2006) calls us to "consider how our pedagogical interventions can help counter stigmatised identities and in doing so challenge heteronormative attitudes and values present within school settings" (p. 357). McDonough (2007) suggests the following changes must occur in order to achieve "post-gay" education: 1) schools must address school violence, bullying and harassment of queer youth; 2) queer role models must be "seamlessly incorporated" into the curriculum, rather than treated as "tokenistic," or "exotic"; 3) teachers must fully understand queer life and "be disposed to treat the complex nature of queerness"; 4) policies must be in place to address hidden discrimination against queer youth that exist "within the textured, complex social life of school communities"; and 5) communities must recognize and accommodate queerness (pp. 805-806). There is some indication that gay identity is gradually becoming "normalized and de-exoticized" in society (Grierson & Smith, 2005, p. 67), suggesting that we are perhaps inching our way toward "post-gayness."

Perhaps, however, in order to achieve a "post-gayness," we must queer pedagogy by whittling away at the binaries that drive our society, and instead begin "thinking with a 'fiendish' desire for difference, excess and the negotiation of power" (Weems, 2007, p. 208). In so doing, we are able to pursue "taboo subjects, including those that render one's desires necessarily dangerous and dangerously necessary for the project of learning" (p. 209). Upon reflecting on the work of the

contributors to this special issue, we hope that you will discover possibilities in your own scholarship and teaching to bring us one step closer to the "post-gay-ness" about which we all dream.

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