

Chapter 4

Ending Bullying and Harassment: The Case for a Queer Pedagogy



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4.1 Introduction

The fall of 2010 was marked by highly publicized suicides that were attributed to homophobic bullying. The September deaths of Billy Lucas, Asher Brown, Seth Walsh, and Tyler Clementi brought public attention to the issues faced by bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer, transgender (BGLQT),¹ and gender-creative² youth in schools. These tragedies also gave inspiration for the Internet video campaign initiated by journalist Dan Savage. He called the initiative the “It Gets Better” project (<http://www.itgetsbetter.org/>) to speak directly to youth who are feeling targeted, isolated, and suicidal to give them hope and strength to survive their current realities. In response to the “It Gets Better” project, the California-based Gay-Straight Alliance Network (<http://gsanetwork.org/>) initiated the “Make It Better” project. The goal of this campaign is to motivate students, educators, politicians, and concerned community members to take action to address the problem of bullying and harassment in schools related to gender and sexuality, a group of behaviors called gendered harassment. Students shouldn’t have to endure constant bullying and harassment or

¹Although some readers may be more familiar with the acronyms LGBT or GLBT, I choose to order the letters alphabetically to attend to the history and politics of exclusion and hierarchies of inclusion within this diverse community. By placing these groups in alphabetical order, I hope to encourage readers to be conscious of attending to the needs and interests of each group inclusively and equitably.

²I use Diane Ehrensaft’s term *gender-creative* to refer to youth whose gender expression in any way transcends the narrow norms of heteronormative masculinity for males and femininity for females. This term is offered as a more positive and inclusive term in contrast to some of the other language used in research literature, including gender atypical, gender variant, gender dysphoric, gender nonnormative, and gender nonconforming.

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wait until they are out of school to experience an inclusive and supportive environment. This chapter is written in the spirit of the “Make It Better” project. The objective is to help current teachers, administrators, school counselors, as well as teacher educators gain the tools and knowledge necessary to understand the complex issues in their school communities related to gendered harassment and the support to take steps to transform their communities.

To provide the reader with a basic understanding of bullying and harassment in schools, the first section introduces gendered harassment (Meyer 2006, 2008) and the role gender and sexuality play in common forms of bullying and harassment in schools. The second section focuses on theory by introducing queer pedagogy and how it can play a role in reducing bullying and harassment by creating safer, more inclusive, and more socially just school environments. The third section addresses legal and policy issues that provide an overview of some of the institutional concerns related to gendered harassment. The fourth section takes up the question of praxis by offering tangible suggestions for taking thoughtful action to positively transform school cultures. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of ways to get others involved and to work strategically to maintain energy, optimism, and employment during the often controversial, challenging yet ultimately rewarding, process of transforming the culture of a school community.

4.2 The Problem: Gendered Harassment

Forms of bullying and harassment that are most common in schools are related to body size, perceived sexual orientation, and gender expression (California Safe Schools Coalition 2004; Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN] and Harris Interactive 2005; National Mental Health Association 2002). The field of queer theory has created innovative ways of thinking about and discussing issues related to embodiment, gender, and sexuality; therefore, these forms of bullying and harassment can be understood in more complex and multidimensional ways when examined through a queer lens. In my research, I have linked these behaviors under the term “gendered harassment” (Meyer 2006, 2008, 2009). Gendered harassment describes any behavior that polices and reinforces the traditional gender roles of heteronormative masculinity and femininity through harmful behaviors that can be physical (hitting, tripping, shoving), verbal (name-calling, spreading rumors, graffiti), or psychological (mean looks, ostracism). Forms of gendered harassment include (hetero)sexual harassment, homophobic harassment, and harassment for gender nonconformity which includes transphobic harassment. These three forms can be linked under the umbrella of gendered harassment because the motives behind these behaviors are linked to the norm setting and public performance of traditional heterosexual, cisnormative, gender roles (Larkin 1994; Renold 2002; Smith and Smith 1998). This section provides an overview of these forms of bullying and harassment as examined through the lens of queer theory.

4.2.1 *Bullying*

Dan Olweus published his first study on the problem of bullying in Norway in 1978 and has consistently set the agenda for research in this field by defining bullying, structuring how researchers study the problem, and creating interventions and evaluations of programs to reduce bullying in schools. He introduced the following definition of bullying:

A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students ... it is a negative action when someone intentionally inflicts, or attempting to inflict, injury or discomfort on another ... Negative actions can be carried out by words (verbally), for instance, by threatening, taunting, teasing, and calling names. It is a negative action when somebody hits, pushes, kicks, pinches or restrains another—by physical contact. It is also possible to carry out negative actions without the use of words or physical contact, such as by making faces or dirty gestures, intentionally excluding someone from a group, or refusing to comply with another person's wishes. (1993, p. 9)

Bullying studies report 9% (Olweus 1993), 33% (Bond et al. 2001), and 58% (Adair et al. 2000) of students are victims of bullying at school. The wide variation in reported rates of bullying may be attributed to how survey questions were phrased, what period was being investigated (entire school career, the past year, the past month), and how the data were analyzed and reported. Researchers also found a large number of negative impacts associated with being the victim of bullying. These studies reported that students who were victims of bullying also reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, hopelessness, and low self-esteem and were more likely to attempt self-harming behaviors and suicide (Bond et al. 2001; Coggan et al. 2003). The problem with the majority of bullying research and related antibullying programs is that they rarely identify or examine social group memberships (race, class, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation), biased attitudes, and how they may interact with the bully-victim phenomenon (Meyer 2014).

More recently, Gruber and Fineran (2008) published the first study to examine the prevalence and impacts of bullying and sexual harassment behaviors in the same study. This information is valuable for educators and scholars as it provides a common frame of reference for understanding these overlapping issues. The authors found that more students experienced bullying (52%) than sexual harassment (34%) and that boys and girls experienced similar levels of bullying (53% vs. 51%) and harassment (36% vs. 34%). Where the authors did find a difference was in students who identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning their sexual orientation (GLBQ). Gruber and Fineran found that GLBQ students experienced more bullying (79% vs. 50%) and more sexual harassment (71% vs. 32%) than non-GLBQ identified students. This study also examined the impacts of bullying and sexual harassment on the health of students. The authors found that girls and GLBQ students generally have poorer health (self-esteem, mental and physical health, and trauma symptoms) during middle and high school. Finally, Gruber and Fineran concluded that sexual harassment has a more severe impact than bullying on a student's overall health. Their findings led them to conclude that "the current trend of focusing on

[bullying], or else subsuming harassment under bullying, draws attention away from a significant health risk” (Gruber and Fineran 2008, p. 9) and that schools need to include sexual harassment interventions as a distinct focus. This leads us to a discussion of sexual harassment.

4.2.2 (Hetero)sexual Harassment

Male students often assert their masculinity by degrading their female peers through common use of terms such as “bitch,” “baby,” “chick,” and “ho.” These are ways in which men attempt to assert their masculinity by degrading their female peers (Larkin 1994). Another common and socially acceptable way to perform masculinity is to sexually objectify female peers and discuss sexual acts they would like to engage in—or have already engaged in (Duncan 1999; Larkin 1994; Stein 1995). This behavior is generally not stopped by teachers and is sometimes even encouraged by their participation. Students report that male teachers might “laugh along with the guys” (Larkin 1994), add to the comments, and even blame the victim (Stein 1995).

Although sexual harassment, by definition, is sexual in nature, it is a form of gendered harassment due to the theoretical understanding of its roots: the public performance of traditional heterosexual gender roles. It is important to acknowledge that men can also be victims of sexual harassment, much of it from other men, and it tends to be homophobic in nature. Young women may also be implicated in such behaviors, and they are most commonly exhibited as verbal insults directed toward other women as a result of competition for boyfriends or between friendship groups (Brown 2003; Duncan 1999).

Sexual harassment has been described as a way of understanding how patriarchy works: how men continue to assert their power over women. Though this is a useful place to begin, it is important to stretch our understanding of this problem to include how highly valued forms of traditionally masculine behaviors are practiced and performed over the devalued forms of traditional notions of femininity. These traditional gender roles are established within a heterosexual matrix (Butler 1990) that allows only for a single dominant form of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich 1978/1993). As long as these attitudes and behaviors go unchallenged, then schools will continue to be sites where young people are harassed out of an education. To prevent this from continuing, we must learn effective strategies for intervention that will help educators create schools where such discriminatory attitudes and behaviors are replaced by more inclusive notions of respect, equality, and understanding.

4.2.3 Homophobic Harassment

Homophobic harassment is any sort of behavior that displays negative attitudes toward bisexual, gay, lesbian, and queer (BGLQ) people, as well as people who may be questioning their sexual orientation or identity. The most common form is verbal

and includes the use of antigay language as an insult (for example, “that’s so gay,” “don’t be such a fag”) and antigay jokes and behaviors that make fun of gays and lesbians (such as affecting the speech and walk of a stereotypically effeminate gay man to get a laugh) (Pascoe 2005; Smith and Smith 1998). In a national study of school climate conducted by the GLSEN, 87.3% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school because of their sexual orientation and 59.5% of LGBT students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation and 44.6% felt unsafe because of their gender (Kosciw et al. 2018). In a more positive note, students have reported less harassment and increased feelings of school safety when a teacher intervened or when schools have a Gay-Straight Alliance (Kosciw et al. 2018).

In addition to the risks that BGLQ youth face in schools as a result of this homophobic climate, students who are transgender, agender, gender-fluid, nonbinary, or gender-creative are also frequently targeted in schools. Harassment of those acting outside the narrow boundaries that define gender norms is often linked with homophobia, but it is important to understand this area separately so as not to confuse existing misconceptions of gender expression and sexual orientation.

4.2.4 *Harassment for Gender Nonconformity*

Harassment for gender nonconforming behaviors is under-researched, but important to understand. According to the one study published in 2004, 27% of all students in California schools reported being harassed for gender nonconformity (California Safe Schools Coalition 2004). Due to prevalent stereotypes in our society of gay men and lesbians who defy traditional gender norms, anyone whose behavior transgresses popular notions of masculinity and femininity is often perceived to be gay. This is a dangerous assumption to make as it mistakenly conflates the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity. There is not enough room here to fully explore the notions of sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation, but each identity is distinct and may be expressed in various ways.³ For example, although many females (sex) identify as heterosexual (sexual orientation) women (gender identity), it does not mean that this is the only possible combination of identities. By perpetuating these misconceptions, schools reinforce traditional notions of heteronormative masculinity and femininity that reduce educational opportunities and school safety for all students. Research has demonstrated that more rigid adherence to traditional sex roles correlates with more negative attitudes and violent behaviors toward gays and lesbians (Bufkin 1999; Whitley 2001). The negative threat of being perceived as a sissy or a tomboy (particularly after puberty), and the resulting homophobic backlash, limits the ways in which students participate in school life. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2003) describe an interview with a student who was harassed for his interest in art:

³ See Butler (1990) for a more in-depth explanation of these concepts and their differences.

On his way to school one morning a group of boys at the back of the bus from one of the local high schools started calling him names. Initially, he was targeted as an “art boy” because he was carrying an art file. But the harassment escalated and they began calling him “fag boy.”

In this example, the students used an antigay slur to harass a student for his gender nonconforming behavior.

Unfortunately, North American society’s ongoing misogyny, or negative attitudes toward femininity, generally makes this gender performance much harder on individuals expressing feminine identities. North American schools generally place a higher value on strength, competitiveness, aggressiveness, and toughness, qualities widely viewed as masculine. Whereas being creative, caring, good at school, and quiet are often considered to be feminine qualities and are viewed by many as signs of weakness—particularly in boys. It is not surprising then that bullying studies report that “typical victims are described as physically weak, and they tended to be timid, anxious, sensitive and shy ... In contrast, bullies were physically strong, aggressive, and impulsive, and had a strong need to dominate others” (Hoover and Juul 1993). It seems difficult to effectively intervene to stop bullying when the qualities that bullies embody are the ones most valued by many and demonstrate a form of power generally esteemed in a male-centered, or patriarchal, society. The pressure on boys to conform to traditional notions of masculinity is great, and the risk of being perceived as gay is an effective threat in policing the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

Students in every school experience various forms and degrees of gendered harassment (Taylor et al. 2011). Due to the prevalence of bullying and harassing behaviors influenced by homophobia, transphobia, as well as other forms of sex and gender bias, educators must have a more complex and nuanced understanding of these social influences. Queer pedagogy is one approach that can provide educators frameworks and tools to more effectively help students understand sex, gender, and sexuality to unlearn their prejudices and transform the toxic environments in many schools.

4.3 Queer Pedagogy

Queer pedagogy defies a static definition, but to provide new readers a starting framework, I offer an excerpt from an early and influential text on queer pedagogy. Bryson and de Castell (1993) describe it as “a radical form of educative praxis implemented deliberately to interfere with, to intervene in, the production of ‘normalcy’ in schooled subjects. We argue for an explicit ‘ethics of consumption’ in relation to curricular inclusions of marginalized subjects and subjugated knowledges” (p. 285). This approach encourages “praxis,” an ongoing cycle of action informed by reflection (Freire 1970/1993). In queer pedagogy, this reflection is focused on how patterns of what is “normal” are created and reproduced in schools and asks teachers and students to examine and question them to make space for

other bodies and identities that have been marginalized and cast outside the “charmed circle” (Rubin 1984/1993) of normalcy. One way this normalcy is inserted into the curriculum is through the prevalence and acceptance of the “fag discourse” (Pascoe 2005; Smith and Smith 1998). The “fag discourse” is the persistent threat of being accused of being gay that is used to regulate masculinity. Examples of this in schools include the use of antigay names, insults, and jokes throughout everyday interactions that are rarely ever challenged or interrupted by the adults in schools.

The concept of queer as a more inclusive and empowering word for anyone who lives outside the boundaries of heteronormative and cisgender identities and relationships emerged in the early 1990s as a controversial and deeply political term (Jagose 1996, p. 76). Queer is understood as a challenge to hetero and cisnormative understandings of gender and sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, binaries, and language that support them. Advocates of a queer pedagogy have used elements of critical and poststructural feminist theories to inform their theoretical frameworks. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990/1993), and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987/2007) were influential works for this emerging school of thought. Jagose (1996) explains that queer theory’s most significant achievement is to specify “how gender operates as a regulatory construct that privileges heterosexuality and, furthermore, how the deconstruction of normative models of gender legitimates lesbian and gay subject-positions” (p. 83). Queering seeks to disrupt and challenge traditional modes of thought around gender and sexual identity and, by standing on the boundaries or “borderlands” (Anzaldúa 1987/2007) drawn by dominant culture, can more effectively examine and dismantle them. Deborah Britzman (1995), a leading theorist in this field, explains how she understands queer theory and its role in learning:

Queer Theory offers methods of critiques to mark the repetitions of normalcy as a structure and as a pedagogy. Whether defining normalcy as an approximation of limits and mastery, or as renunciations, as the refusal of difference itself, Queer Theory insists on posing the production of normalization as a problem of culture and of thought. (p. 154)

Britzman (2000) specifically addresses how sexuality is currently inserted in the school curriculum. She notes, “this has to do with how the curriculum structures modes of behavior and orientations to knowledge that are repetitions of the underlying structure and dynamics of education: compliance, conformity, and the myth that knowledge cures” (2000, p. 35). In discussing how to challenge *pedagogical* forms of resistance, Britzman (2000) encourages educators to recognize the power that *Eros* can play in teaching. By understanding sexuality as a force that “allows the human its capacity for passion, interests, explorations, disappointment, and drama” and “because sexuality is both private and public—something from inside of bodies and something made between bodies—we must focus on sexuality in terms of its contradictory, discontinuous, and ambiguous workings” (2000, p. 37).

This disruption and open discussion of previously silenced issues can be difficult for teachers to navigate. Queer pedagogy empowers educators to open up traditionally silenced discourses and create spaces for students to explore and challenge the

hierarchy of identities that is created and supported by schools, such as teacher-student, jock-nerd, sciences-arts, male-female, Black-White, rich-poor, disabled/able-bodied, cis/trans, and gay-straight. To move past this, teachers must learn to see schooling as a place to question, explore, and seek alternative explanations rather than a place where knowledge means “certainty, authority, and stability” (Britzman 2000, p. 51). Although the term “queer pedagogy” might seem difficult for some teachers to embrace, it can help educators, youth advocates, schools, and other institutions creatively and effectively work to end bullying by transforming hostile and oppressive environments and meeting the needs of all students.

Queer pedagogy offers a further extension of ideas introduced by social justice education, critical and feminist pedagogies, multiculturalism as well as antioppressive theories, by calling on educators to question and reformulate through a queer pedagogical lens: (a) how they teach, reinforce, or expand normalized gendered practices in schools; (b) how heteronormativity is repeated or questioned; and (c) how they embrace or challenge other repetitions of normalcy in their classrooms. Schools can do more to challenge and disrupt traditional ways of knowing and encourage students to question all that is normally assumed and taken for granted in society so that all students have a fair chance to learn in a physically and psychologically safe environment.

4.4 Politics and Praxis

4.4.1 *Politics and Policies*

Institutional silence and violence are responsible for many severe cases of gendered harassment. Since the mid-1990s, there have been several legal cases where students and their families successfully sued their principals and/or school districts as a result of the severe, pervasive, and harmful harassment they experienced in schools, including the following:

- A high school student subjected to repeated acts of homophobic harassment, and as a result, he had been hospitalized, dropped out of school, and attempted suicide. The court wrote, “[W]e are unable to garner any rational basis for permitting one student to assault another based on the victim’s sexual orientation,” and the school district settled with Nabozny for \$900,000 (*Nabozny v. Podlesny* 1996).
- A fifth-grade girl was repeatedly sexually harassed by a male classmate such that her grades declined drastically, and she wrote a suicide note. Schools are not responsible for the actions of the harassing student, “but rather for its own discrimination in failing to take immediate and appropriate steps to remedy the hostile environment once a school official knows about it” (Office for Civil Rights 1997; *Davis v. Monroe County* 1999).

- A female-identified transgender student was repeatedly sent home by her principal for “dress code violations,” and began requiring her to check with him to have her clothing approved on a daily basis. The court found that the treatment she received from her school principal violated sex discrimination protections provided by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and that the school could not place restrictions on her attire based on her sex assigned at birth (*Doe v. Brockton 2000*).
- A group of high school students filed a class-action suit against their school district for failing to protect them from repeated homophobic harassment. The court found sufficient evidence of deliberate indifference to the ongoing sexual orientation harassment of six students in this California School District, which resulted in a \$1,100,000 settlement with the students (*Flores v. Morgan Hill 2003*).
- A student was bullied for his “perceived lack of masculinity” and the court decided that the environment at school was so “severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denied (him) an education in the Tonganoxie school district” (*Theno v. Tonganoxie 2005*).
- In 2017, a high school student refused access to the boys’ room won a federal ruling, after his graduation, enabling him to use male facilities should he return to his Gloucester County, Virginia high school. The court ruled that the school district had violated Title IX by refusing him access. In a related case, *Whitaker v. Kenosha Unified School District (2017)*, the school district paid an \$800,000 settlement to Ash Whitaker for refusing him access to male facilities, despite requests from his mother and his doctor that the school district help him socially transition.

These official acts of homophobia, transphobia, and misogyny enacted by school administrators either by their actions or inactions linked to acts of gendered harassment, are a central element in establishing either an inclusive or hostile learning environment at school. In recent years, there has been an increase in state legislation and federal enforcement and guidance that address homophobic bullying and sexual harassment in schools.

State nondiscrimination laws that protect individuals based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity exist in only 22 states and the District of Columbia (Out & Equal Workplace Advocates 2017). However, according to the Human Rights Watch (2017), only 19 states and Washington, DC have statutes specifically protecting students in schools from bullying based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity. Students in states that have these protections reported significantly lower rates of verbal harassment than their peers (Kosciw et al. 2010). In addition, eight states have legislation that prohibits the positive portrayal of homosexuality in school curricula (Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah), and students in these states reported being verbally harassed at a higher frequency than students from states without such legislation (47.6% compared to 37.2%; Kosciw and Diaz 2006, p. 86). In 2011, the state of California passed the FAIR Education Act. This is the first law of its kind as it requires the inclusion of LGBT people and people with disabilities across the K-12 social stud-

ies curriculum and prohibits lessons and materials that reflect negatively on members of these groups. When the Supreme Court ruled in 2015 that same-sex marriage was legal in all 50 states, it provided further impetus to include lessons on family diversity.

Even when there are policies in place, there are often other institutional barriers to implementation. Canada has federal and provincial laws protecting individuals from discrimination based on sexual orientation, and the Toronto District School Board has one of the most innovative and inclusive education and intervention programs to address issues of gender and sexuality in their schools. However, in a research report evaluating the program, Goldstein et al. (2005) identified the following obstacles to this type of equity work:

1. Time restrictions,
2. Limits on language peer educators could use,
3. Lack of ongoing institutional support and follow up to anti-homophobia education,
4. Fear of being reprimanded for conducting anti-homophobia education,
5. Fear of being harassed or threatened by parents, colleagues and school administration,
6. Fear of not being able to respond to student queries about homosexuality,
7. Conflicts between educators' commitment to equity and personal religious beliefs,
8. Issues with students not being prepared for an anti-homophobia workshop so they entered hostile and unreceptive. (p. 4)

These factors are important to understand and address if we want to have any hope of ending bullying and harassment in schools—particularly forms linked to gender and sexuality. Getting legal and policy support is an important step to ending gendered harassment and other forms of bullying, but it is not essential for implementing a queer pedagogy that can transform attitudes, behaviors, and the overall school climate. The next section introduces suggested approaches to taking reflective action by applying principles of queer pedagogy.

4.4.2 Praxis—Teaching Queerly

To create a school or classroom environment that is a safe and inclusive space where multiple perspectives and ideas are encouraged and valued, teachers must work explicitly and consistently to meet this goal. Some effective classroom management and instructional strategies can be slightly modified to reduce incidents of bullying and harassment by applying a queer pedagogical lens. These approaches include (a) constructivist (or student-centered) teaching, (b) inquiry or problem-based instruction, (c) democratic or citizenship education, (d) auto-ethnography or self-study, and (e) addressing issues of equity and diversity related to gender and sexuality in the official curriculum.

Constructivist models of education are gaining in popularity across North America (DeVries et al. 2001; Steffe and Gale 1995). Constructivist pedagogy places the students at the center of the learning process and actively engages them in ways that more traditional, didactic, teaching methods cannot. Classroom activities that encourage students to ask questions, pursue their own interests, and work at their own pace all fit the constructivist model of teaching. By placing students' experiences and questions at the center of the learning process, educators make space to address issues that are relevant to students' lives and interests. During adolescence, issues of identity, relationships, and sexuality are very important to students. Teachers can incorporate these concerns across the curriculum by using students' questions, stories, and interests as texts for discussion and exploration. By making space to discuss issues of gender and sexuality across the curriculum, educators can challenge the "normalcy" of heteronormative teen life that is presented in the popular media and shift the culture of a class or the school. Project or inquiry-based learning is a form of constructivist teaching that allows students to pose questions, discover answers, and teach each other along the way.

Project or inquiry-based activities allow students to work individually or in small groups to learn about a particular issue or problem and then share their knowledge with the rest of the class. This approach allows students to bring in new sources of information and allows multiple perspectives to be heard. Rather than students listening to the teacher or reading from a textbook, they are able to interview their families and community members, read books, and conduct searches in the library and on the Internet for additional sources of information. By shifting away from using textbooks for learning, teachers can inspire students to think outside the box, and again challenge dominant, or "normal" ways of seeing the world. With the careful guidance of the teacher, students learn to evaluate various sources of information and make informed decisions about the perspectives that make the most sense in the context of what they are learning. These inquiry and critical thinking skills are higher-order skills than those of memorization and repetition that are practiced in a more traditional teacher-centered classroom. Although the topics may not be explicitly queer, the approach of exploring marginalized experiences and decentering dominant discourses is an exercise that is consistent with queer pedagogy.

A third approach to teaching that is informed by queer pedagogy is democratic or citizenship education. Democratic theories of education argue that students should be encouraged to talk through their differences with adult support and learn from their divergent points of view. Teachers should establish basic expectations early in the school year through a classroom contract or code of conduct that is co-constructed with the students in the class so they feel ownership over the support and reinforcement of the rules or guidelines. By establishing clear expectations for behavior and participation early on and in a collective way, teachers not only model the behaviors they seek to develop in their students but also engage them in a collective classroom activity that allows them to play a central role in creating the classroom community they will be learning in all year long. These styles of teaching create a classroom environment that allows students to experience the democratic decision-making process. It encourages students to share their ideas, debate the

ones that evoke some controversy, and arrive at a decision that the entire class can live with. Democratic education isn't just about voting and majority rules. It is about participating in the process and being given the opportunity to frame the debate and have one's own perspectives considered by others. Structured debates are one effective approach to discussing controversial issues in a class, school, or town community. Activities where students are encouraged to look at issues from multiple viewpoints and take a stand to defend a perspective on an issue can allow important learning to occur: not just on a particular subject but on the process of learning and engaging in political processes.

Another citizenship activity can involve getting students involved in local or national social justice issues such as environmental concerns, poverty, immigration reform, LGBTQ rights, or school reform. Supporting students' engagement in real-life problems that affect the students' communities can contribute to students' life-long learning in ways that studying an issue in a textbook cannot. Teachers can suggest activities such as letter-writing campaigns, drafting and circulating petitions, attending school board and city council meetings, or planning and participating in a public demonstration. Although many teachers might shy away from such political involvement, there are compelling reasons to support such work with students. First, if the students choose the topic and the activities, then the project will engage the students personally and reflect their interests and perspectives. Second, students often complain that what they are learning in school has no connection to real life, and this is one way to address that concern. Third, as mentioned above, when students are asked to create their own ideas, carefully evaluate others' ideas, and construct an appropriate and reasoned response, they are using much more advanced academic skills than the ones they are called on to use in a more typical classroom environment. There are many stories of students using such skills to advocate for a Gay-Straight Alliance in their school (*East High GSA v. Salt Lake* 1999; Griffin et al. 2004; Macgillivray 2005; Mayo 2017) to plan a "Day of Silence" (*Harper v. Poway Unified* 2006; Skowronski 2008; Wegwert 2011), or to take an organized stand against bullying and homophobia in their school community by coordinating a "wear pink day" (Mills 2007). Engaging in real-life work also demonstrates intersectionality—that gender and sexuality issues are always connected to other communities' struggles for justice.

A fourth approach to teaching involves engaging students in a form of research called auto-ethnography, or self-study. This approach encourages participants to carefully examine their own identities and community affiliations as well as the privileges and biases that accompany them: what is valued and what is not in one's own family, school, or religious institution. This kind of teaching asks teachers and students to engage in reflective identity-work, much like that which was illustrated in the film *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese 2006). It asks students to "analyze their own lives in order to develop their practical consciousness about real injustices in society and to develop constructive responses" (Sleeter and Grant 1994, p. 225). Although this approach might seem more appropriate at the secondary level, it can be done with younger students in different ways using visual arts, drama, storytelling, and other media to help students articulate their stories and perspectives. Some

excellent examples of this are displayed in the film *It's Elementary: Talking about Gay Issues in School* (Chasnoff 1996).

A final approach is to incorporate lessons that ask students to talk about issues related to gender and sexuality and how they are connected to issues of equity and diversity. Students of any age can talk about “what it means to be a boy/girl,” or conduct a survey of media texts (books, comic books, magazines, TV shows) and how various gender identities and expressions are represented. By giving students the language and opportunity to talk openly about the variety of gender identities and expressions and how they are valued or devalued, you offer them the tools to begin critically evaluating their entire social world. One interesting study examined what happened when teachers gave elementary students scenarios of children being excluded or teased for their gender. The study found that when students were given practice and experience confronting these situations, the students were able to effectively challenge other incidents of gender bias at school (Lamb et al. 2009). Additional resources for ideas of texts and activities are listed at the end of the chapter.

4.5 Conclusion

Many educators and parents feel fearful and threatened when the topic of gender and sexuality is addressed in the school setting. The threat of personal and professional backlash often keeps caring and motivated educators from acting on these issues. However, to change the current reality in schools, courageous and motivated leaders are needed in every school community. This chapter was written to offer readers the information and support to become a leader in their community and to begin taking on a more comprehensive approach to reduce bullying and harassment. If you choose to take on this role, it is important to be aware of potential obstacles and ways that you can sustain your energy and spirit to engage in this work for the long haul. Systemic change happens slowly and only with the concerted effort of many stakeholders. Therefore, I encourage you to build coalitions with other people in your community engaging in this work. If you have a strong support network and a growing pool of concerned, active citizens, then you can reduce the risk of feeling depleted, overwhelmed, and burnt out in the process of transforming your school and community for the better.

At the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in 2009, Catherine Lugg, a leading queer scholar at Rutgers University, poignantly demanded, “How many dead queer kids will it take” for responsible adults to take action on their behalf? The answer for me is zero. We have already lost too many lives to suicide, drug abuse, and homelessness as a result of the homophobia and transphobia in schools. Almost a decade later, Lugg (2016) continues to argue against the systematic erasure of queer youth and pedagogies from US schools. Now is the time for action, and I hope you will finish this chapter and identify one thing you can do today to “make it better” for all youth in America’s schools.

Action ideas:

1. Contact your local high school and ask them if they have a bullying and harassment policy that explicitly includes gender identity and expression and sexual orientation as protected classes. If not, find out what the process is to add or amend a policy.
2. Find a local chapter of GLSEN (www.glsen.org) or Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG; www.pflag.org) and ask how you can support their work on these issues in your state.
3. Contact the LGBT caucus of your local teachers' union and ask what issues they are currently working on and how you can get involved.
4. Plan a professional development workshop for your school community on issues related to gender, sexuality, bullying, and harassment.
5. Initiate a social justice task force or school safety committee and invite representatives from various constituencies, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, and community members.
6. Start a book group with colleagues and read one of the titles suggested at the end of this chapter.
7. Design and implement a lesson or unit plan that applies one of the pedagogical approaches listed above.
8. Work with colleagues to develop an interdisciplinary unit on gender and sexuality (collaborate with Language Arts, Social Sciences, Math, Art, and Science teachers).

Additional Resources:

- The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's K–12 curriculum site: <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/record/2461.html?state=tools&type=educator>
- Human Rights Campaign's Welcoming Schools K–6 curriculum kit: <http://www.welcomingschools.org/>
- Media Awareness Network K–12 lesson plans: <http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/>
- Southern Poverty Law Center's Teaching Tolerance K–12 lesson plans: <http://www.tolerance.org/activities>
- Bryan, J. (2012). *From the dress-up corner to the senior prom: Navigating gender and sexuality diversity in PreK–12 schools*. New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield.
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