Chapter 6
"That Wasn't Very Free Thinker": Queer Critical Pedagogy in the Early Grades

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One February morning a few years ago I found myself unexpectedly sitting in the audience of a "wedding" performance. I was at an assembly at a local elementary school to support my kindergartener, Riley,[1] who was being recognized as a Student of the Month. I quickly learned that there was more to the assembly than the awards presentation when the second graders noisily arranged their costumed selves and their props on the stage. One of their teachers announced that the second graders were excited to share some of what they were learning with the rest of the school. The second graders were particularly excited about being responsible for delivering some sort of performance at the February assembly, since Valentine's Day is in February. They were going to perform a play that focused on the themes of love and literacy by showcasing the way that the letters *Q* and *U* are almost always coupled in the English language. The second graders went on to demonstrate their knowledge of this rule to their schoolmates by performing a play called *The Marriage of Q and U*, which their teachers had adapted from a children's book.[2] Each second

[1] All names, except for Riley's, are pseudonyms. Riley is adamant that whenever I use examples from his experience in school in the classes I teach I use his real name so my students know that they are "kind of learning from him." He feels similarly about my writing. My partner and I also recognize that providing him with a pseudonym when writing would do little to protect his identity as he already has a presence in the public arena with his own name. For example, he has given a speech at the Utah State Capitol, appeared in a documentary and a photo exhibit, been on the front page of statewide newspapers, and been part of the lead story on local newscasts.

[2] A cursory Internet search yields variations of this story (Dillon-Hreha 2007; Nagus 2010; Gavin 2014) and many links to lesson plans for elementary school teachers, particularly those working in grades K–2, to incorporate the book into their curricula. Many of the lesson plans suggest acting out/performing the wedding (Gavin 2014) of *Q* and *U,* and a number of news outlets around the country have stories about elementary school children doing so. Additionally, YouTube has a number of videos of these wedding performances. For news coverage, see for

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C. Mayo, N. M. Rodriguez (eds.), *Queer Pedagogies*, Critical Studies of Education 11, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27066-7_6

grader played a role, most of them were other letters, but a select few were invited wedding guests. There were "queens" on one side of the aisle and "quarterbacks" on the other side. In the middle, the beautiful bride—the letter *Q*—stood beside her groom—the letter *U*—and the principal, dubbed a minister, married the two.

It was cute, creative, and tied into their curriculum. It captivated the audience, drew laughter and applause, and seemed to make the second graders and their teachers proud. Even so, I could not get past the sexism, the stereotypical gender roles, the compulsive heterosexuality, or the strong Christian undertones. Of course, it was the bride who could not function without the groom. "*U* doesn't need *Q,* but *Q* always needs *U*." *U* was the groom who was often needed elsewhere—"like in the word underwear." But *Q* (who stays home watching over the other letters) cannot go anywhere without *U*. Additionally, all of the queens were girls and all of the quarterbacks were boys. And the principal showed her support of the second graders by performing the part of a minister, not a justice of the peace. These are just the most obvious symbolic representations, but the messages they sent—messages glaringly apparent to me and a few other audience members—seemed to be lost on the majority of those in the fully packed gymnasium.

After the assembly was over, my partner and I found our son to congratulate him. His teacher came over to say hello and share her accolades while we were talking with Riley. She walked into a brief discussion about the play. Riley noticed his teacher's presence, turned to her and said matter-of-factly, "Ms. J., that was not a very free-thinker[3] play—I think we should have a talk about it when we get back to class." To my delight, she agreed with him and promised to do just that. That evening Riley informed us that they had indeed engaged in a discussion, and together his kindergarten class decided they should have let some of the queens be boys and some of the quarterbacks be girls. Riley also shared that when he reminded his classmates that in families like his the *Q* and the *U* would both be girls, they said "Oh, yeah," and decided it would also be possible for the *Q* and the *U* to both be boys.

Ultimately, this kindergarten class was able to, at least for a moment in time, destabilize the heteronormativity of their school. They were able to engage in a process that I am calling *queer critical pedagogy*. I see this as a pedagogy that utilizes elements of critical pedagogy to engage in theoretically queer projects—projects aimed at naming, interrupting, and destabilizing normative practices and beliefs. In this chapter I will return to the example provided by this kindergarten class in order to further consider what queer critical pedagogy *might* mean. I will weave this moment together with other moments and propositions offered by queer theorists and critical pedagogues. In doing so, I will grapple with the ways that the

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example: http://www.myfoxtampabay.com/dpp/news/local/polk/marriage-of-q-and-u-022412, http://www.observernewsonline.com/content/q-marries-u-shuford-elementary, or http://savannahnow.com/west-chatham/2011-02-23/wedding-q-and-u#.T2EUtHj5bao

[3] *Free thinker* is a concept Riley uses to describe thinking that is free from the status quo, or as he puts it "free from having to think like everybody thinks you should think." It is a common part of his vocabulary and has helped him articulate his feelings about friends who chide him for wearing pink socks or having longer hair. "I'm trying to help them learn how to be free thinkers, so they can wear what they want or have their hair how they want, without worrying about what other people will say."

moments and propositions are always contingent upon other moments and propositions that simultaneously multiply and close off possibilities and that trouble normativity while depending upon it.

In considering queer critical pedagogy—what it could look like, what possibilities it might allow for, and what ways it may be limited—I understand queer pedagogy as a way to augment critical pedagogy. Queer pedagogy extends what is possible to talk about, question, and analyze because, while critical pedagogy calls on students to read the world and pose problems about what they read, queer pedagogy requires that problems are posed that specifically take up the limitations of hegemonic and normative ideas about gender and sexuality. Malinowitz (1995) claims that "critical pedagogy seems like an inevitable component of any gay-affirmative classroom practice" (p. 26). She bases this claim in the way critical pedagogy positions education as emancipatory and an agent of social change. It is antiassimilationist in that students and teachers work to read against normative and hegemonic sociocultural discourses.

Malinowitz posits that many LGBTQ students are already engaging in critical pedagogy since they "*must* read against the hegemonic discourse of homophobia in order to come out" (p. 26). Malinowitz writes about her work as a professor for a college composition class entitled *Writing about Gay and Lesbian Experience*, so it is to be expected that at least some of the students enrolled in the class are already engaged in critical pedagogy in the way Malinowitz explains it. Indeed, it seems that they are already engaged in what I call queer critical pedagogy, since they are reading and writing against heteronormativity, and they are being encouraged in the class to queer their reading of and writing about the world and their experiences.

In a similar vein, Sears (1999) explains that queering elementary education, or teaching queerly, "Is creating classrooms that challenge categorical thinking, promote interpersonal intelligence, and foster critical consciousness…. [And it] demands we explore taken-for-granted assumptions about diversity, identities, childhood, and prejudice" (p. 5). Sears and the other contributors to the book *Queering Elementary Education* write against (and teach against) the heteronormativity that permeates elementary schools and classrooms. Sears is posing a problem for educators to grapple with, the problem being the way elementary school classrooms leave queerness out; there is little room for LGBTQ identification or considering LGBTQ issues or people in the curriculum and even less room for questioning heteronormativity and its rigid binaries defining gender and sexuality. Further complicating how we bring queerness and complexity into schools is the approach to childhood development that neglects the complexities of gender and sexuality among youth (Farley 2018). Granted, there are examples of teachers or items of curricula that do in fact meet Sears's call for teaching queerly, but these examples (including Riley's experience) are exemplary in that they stand out as uniquely commendable examples of a merging of queer pedagogy and critical pedagogy—they are queer critical pedagogy.

Queer critical pedagogy is not common in elementary schools, particularly in the elementary schools in largely conservative areas of the country; therefore, I find Riley's experience that much more instructive given the fact that it happened in Utah, which at the time of this writing is one of the most politically conservative states in the US. In what follows, I will continue to work with the idea of queer

critical pedagogy and the way I see queer pedagogy augmenting critical pedagogy. I will do this by first making connections between critical pedagogy and queer pedagogy, then discussing the ways that queer critical pedagogy is simultaneously possible and impossible, full of possibility yet constrained by limited discursive possibilities. Then I will engage with some feminist critiques of critical pedagogy, mainly those concerning the tenets of empowerment, student voice, and dialogue in order to consider the (im)possibility/ies of queer critical pedagogy. I will return to Riley's experience throughout the chapter as a practical example to work through, problematize, and think out from.

It is my goal to sketch—with something as impermanent and changeable as chalk—the potentiality of bringing queerness to critical pedagogy in elementary school classrooms. This is not to say that critical pedagogy is always unqueer or not queer friendly; rather, it is to say that critical pedagogy with its focus on questioning and problematizing the status quo is queer friendly and can be (or in some cases already is) quite queer. By calling this queer critical pedagogy, I hope to foreground the importance of engaging in educational projects that are built around posing problems about the heteronormativity of our schools and the surrounding communities.

6.1 Connections Between Critical Pedagogy and Queer Pedagogy

"If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which they achieve significance as human beings" (Freire 1998: 69). Freire is among the most influential educational philosophers involved in the development and spread of critical pedagogical theory and practice, the combination of which Freire calls praxis (Darder et al. 2003). Central to his concept of critical pedagogy is the role of dialogue, which is founded upon love, humility, faith, hope, and critical thinking. For Freire, it is only through this type of dialogue that true education can occur—true education being education for the practice of freedom. This type of dialogue works for an educational process that is emancipatory and empowers students to become subjects of their world. Students and teachers alike engage in a process of reflection and action together in a dialogical problem-posing process in which all parties have something to give to the process and all parties take something away from the process. It is essential that teachers learn from students, just as students learn from teachers.

The approach is grounded in posing problems that are significant to the students and teachers participating in the educational process. Thus, lived experience becomes central to the dialogue and is part of the way that current conditions and knowledge are explored genealogically in an attempt to imagine new and different possibilities for freedom. Conscientization is the ultimate goal of this process. It is defined by Darder et al. (2003) as:

> The process by which students, as empowered subjects, achieve a deepening awareness of the social realities that shape their lives and discover their own capacities to re-create them. [It is] a recurrent, regenerating process of human interaction that is utilized for constant clarification of the hidden dimensions of reflections and actions, as students and teachers move freely through the world of their experiences and enter into dialogue once more. (p. 15)

In many ways this process of conscientization is similar to the project of queer theory which, according to Britzman (1995), "offers methods of critiques to mark the repetitions of normalcy as a structure and as a pedagogy…. [it] insists on posing the production of normalization as a problem of culture and of thought" (pp. 153–154). Kopelson (2002) explains that queer theory is assumed to rupture and oftentimes "*strives* to confuse, as it strives to push thought beyond what can *be thought*" (p. 20). These explanations of a theoretical approach can certainly be read as calls for praxis and as pedagogical approaches to teaching. They are invitations to create classrooms where teachers and students can work toward a kind of queer conscientization where students and teachers "achieve a deepening awareness of the [ways that heteronormative discourses and socio-cultural practices] … shape their lives and [grapple with] their own capacities to [undo] and re-create" (adapting Darder et al. 2003: 15).

Given the shared interest in posing problems about normalized social circumstances and working to recreate or imagine new possibilities, it is not surprising that some educators find ways to bring both critical pedagogy and queer theory into their daily classroom pedagogies. This is especially the case for educators who are themselves invested in destabilizing the common, comfortable, and generally unquestioned heteronormativity in school spaces—including K–12 and postsecondary educational institutions—and society in general. There is a paradox though, because the elements of critical pedagogy utilized to create possibilities to disrupt heteronormativity are taken up in the context of a society rife with heteronormativity. People's ability to use these elements relies on their understanding and acceptance of this heteronormativity in order to make sense of the very problems they pose, the experiences they have, and the dialogues they engage in.

In other words, if stereotypical gender roles and compulsory heterosexuality were not the norm, Riley would not have felt the need to ask his teacher to engage the class in a dialogue about the elements of the play that were not representative of "free thinking." If these were not already the norms, he would not have felt the need to pose the outright performance of the desirability, naturalness, and general acceptability of these norms as a problem. Therefore, it is essential to read the story about Riley's classroom dialogue about the play in multiple ways. One important reading provides an example of the possibilities created by queer critical pedagogy. We must also read it to gain a deeper understanding of the complex elements that came together to create the momentary destabilization of heteronormativity, as well as the ways that the dialogue reinforced heteronormativity. In doing so, we must read it with context in mind because a number of elements came together to allow the possibility of the existence of this discussion—a discussion that perhaps could not, or would not, have happened in a different context.

6.2 Possibility/ies of Queer Critical Pedagogy?

That said, the question becomes, *to what extent is queer critical pedagogy possible?* This question requires that we explore the limitations of critical pedagogy for disrupting heteronormativity and also understand the complexities of queerness (Gilbert 2014). Many of the questions about the place of queerness in critical pedagogy offered in this chapter are connected to critiques of critical pedagogy put forth by poststructuralist feminists such as Mimi Orner (1992), Alison Jones (1999, 2004), Jennifer Gore (1993, 2003), and Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989, 1997). The questions and critiques will help us take a closer look at the moment of queer critical pedagogy that occurred in Riley's kindergarten classroom.

I'd like to begin by considering the use of the word *critical* to describe pedagogy as it has essentially become one of many code words used to make the political agenda of a course invisible or at least less visible. This has allowed educators to access public resources in order to further the goals of social justice in education, which they believe will ultimately serve the greater good of the general public. However, it has also served to prevent the critical education movement from having to or being able to make their agenda explicit or consistent among the community of practitioners (Ellsworth 1989). This can mean that some issues are taken up in some places while others are further marginalized. It can also mean that issues one might expect to be marginalized are actually foregrounded in strategic, sometimes stealth, ways.

Heteronormativity, for example, is not always overtly named as one of the ideologies or systems critical pedagogy intends to put under the microscope (Malinowitz 1995). This can mean that queerness is silenced in the name of critical liberatory pedagogy. It can also mean that queerness and queering are so much a part of the pedagogy that they need not be overtly named. This points to the importance of queer critical pedagogy as it requires that the normalization of heteronormativity be removed from its secure location in the realms of the status quo, the unquestioned, the taken-for-granted, and the unnoticed. It requires that the normalization of heteronormativity be brought out into the open and publicly interrogated out loud. Queer theory in a sense has made the pedagogical goal of disrupting heteronormativity thinkable and sayable. And critical pedagogy can, and in many instances does, open up spaces for such interrogations, in various ways ranging from individual writing assignments to stumbled-upon classroom discussions, to intentionally integrated curricula that center questioning norms.

Key tenets of critical pedagogy such as empowerment, student voice, and dialogue have been taken up in order to bring the process of critiquing the normalization of heteronormativity to the front of the class. These tenets are not necessarily very queer though, as they oftentimes perpetuate binaries or at the very least hierarchies. For example, a student is empowered or not, or one student's voice is more hearable (intelligible) than others, or some dialogues are more productive than others. A queer pedagogy works against binaries and hierarchies, and so too must a queer critical

pedagogy. At a conference dedicated to critical pedagogy in 1993, Britzman offered the following thoughts:

> A queer pedagogy, [is] one that refuses normal practices and practices of normalcy, one that begins with an ethical concern for one's *own* reading practices, one that is interested in exploring what one cannot bear to know, one interested in the imagining of a sociality unhinged from the dominant conceptual order. (p. 165)

I believe that "imagining … a sociality unhinged from the dominant conceptual order" requires educators to carefully consider their own beliefs about and use of empowerment, student voice, and dialogue in their classrooms. This does not mean that these are not useful and indeed important pedagogical tools; it does mean that they must be used with intentionality and in such a way that they never become unquestioned or unquestionable. I find it instructive to continually grapple with feminist critiques of critical pedagogy, as they push me to never be satisfied or complacent with the possibilities I see in queer critical pedagogy. My commitment is to continuously work the possibilities (and the limitations) in an attempt to prevent them from becoming new boundaries drawn around what is acceptable or appropriate thinking for students and teachers.

Ellsworth (1989) claims some of the most fundamental tenets of critical pedagogy—"dialogue," "student voice," "empowerment," and "critical" elements—are "repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination" (p. 298). She reports that when she and her students engaged in the practices of dialogue, student voice, and empowerment, as defined by the literature concerning critical pedagogy, the outcome often produced results that reinforced the very situations they were working against such as racism, classism, and sexism. Bryson and de Castell (1993b) enter this discussion when they make the claim that "despite our explicit interventions, all of our discourses, all of our actions in this course were permeated with the continuous and inescapable backdrop of white heterosexual dominance" (p. 285). If it is true that problems can only be posed in the language that is available to us, that we can never escape racism, classism, sexism, or heterosexism, then how do we rupture the discourse and speak outside of it?

In Riley's classroom, the discussion was fundamentally grounded in the students' attempts to redefine possible gender roles and options for marriage. Marriage is at its heart a concept and practice that is all about heterosexuality—there was no problem posed regarding the very necessity of marriage for anyone. Additionally, the students said that girls could do boy things and vice versa, but the things were still understood to be girl or boy things. So they were posing problems, but they were posing problems within the norms they already understood regarding gender and heterosexuality. I would argue that they were also pushing back (or maybe out) against those norms though, since they were using the available language in ways that they had not before used in their classroom, in ways that made sense to them in that moment but were not necessarily commonsensical.

Kumashiro (2002) posits that "education involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world" (p. 63). Riley and his classmates did engage in disrupting the commonsense messages heralded by the play *The Marriage*

of Q and U, but there were other commonsense notions that they did not disrupt. Is it the case that they were empowered to disrupt some commonsense views of the world and not others? My guess is that this is indeed the case. Their empowerment and lack of empowerment could have come from their homes, the media, their teacher, or somewhere/one else. Regardless of the roots of un/empowerment, it played a significant part in the ways that the students used their voices and engaged in their dialogue about free thinking. Certainly, in this case, empowerment seems to be of central importance to this moment of queer critical pedagogy and as such must be interrogated.

Since the discussion occurred within a kindergarten classroom I will primarily focus my considerations of empowerment on the ways that teachers and students are empowered or not in educational spaces. In this particular situation it seems that empowerment allowed for Riley, as well as some classmates and their teacher, to speak up, pose problems, and engage in dialogue. I am particularly interested in grappling with the issue of empowerment and the way it allowed for (and to a lesser extent was supported by) student voice, problem posing, and dialogue. In other words, how was empowerment an essential component for these kindergartners to navigate a heteronormative discourse in order to speak new ideas and identities into existence in their classroom? And how is empowerment simply not enough on its own to do this work?

6.3 Empowerment

One of the goals of critical pedagogy is to reconceptualize the institutionalized power imbalances between students and teachers as well as the "essentially paternalistic project of education itself" (Ellsworth 1989: 306). Central to working toward realizing this goal are notions of student empowerment, which are tied closely to an interrogation of the ways that teachers are in power. Gore (2003) claims that there are three general presuppositions used to give meaning to the concept of empowerment: "(1) an agent of empowerment, (2) a notion of power as property, and (3) some kind of vision or desirable end state" (p. 333).

In critical pedagogy, teachers are typically positioned to empower their students to use critical thinking skills to tackle the problems of the world. This of course implies that teachers have agency in their classrooms, and there is a risk that presupposing this agency allows us to underestimate the contexts in which the teachers live and work. For example, Bryson and de Castell (1993a, b) remind us that the heteronormative context in which they live and work causes them to run the risk of losing the power that they do have once they come out as lesbians in their classes. In many ways their agency is connected to the ways students read their identities, which is also connected to their effectiveness as educators. This understanding of empowerment also positions power as something that can be possessed as well as "given, provided, controlled, held, conferred, [and/or] taken away" (Ellsworth

1989: 334). Finally, the end goal of empowerment is presupposed as liberation from oppression or as Freire puts it, freedom.

There is a connection between being a critical teacher who can empower students and acknowledging that education is a political act; thus, critical teachers are also assumed to be politicized teachers. McWilliam (1997) explains "'Good' (i.e., politicizing) teachers were heralded as *transformative intellectuals* who *empower* and *emancipate* themselves and others, while refusing the role of passive recipient of top-down reforms" (p. 220). While I agree that education is a political act and that neutrality is a farce, I also wonder what the goals of emancipation and empowerment mean in the context of sexuality. It seems that critical pedagogy equates emancipation with the freedom LGBTQ people find through the act of coming out of the closet. It would follow, then, that LGBTQ teachers who come out in the classroom are emancipated and can empower their LGBTQ students to also come out.

The problems associated with this expected type of politicization among LGBTQ educators are that (1) this is not always possible and (2) this is not always desirable. For example, in an essay about teaching English composition at a conservative public college in Utah where over 90% of the student population are members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), Wood (2005) discusses her struggles with the silence she invites by existing as a lesbian on the campus through performing heterosexuality. Wood works to empower her students to be less dependent on the unexamined hegemonic assumptions they rely on to structure their lives. She uses critical theory and queer theory in her classes as pedagogical tools but is conscious that her heterosexual colleagues who also do this while mentioning their spouses, children, or families are not read the same way as she is since she does not reveal her personal or political self in the classroom. She is aware that in the context in which she teaches, coming out could trigger resistance not only to her as a teacher but also to the material. She is also aware of the threats to her personal and professional safety that accompany the decision to come out and to be a politicized educator in this context. So for Wood, coming out in the classroom is not emancipatory but neither is remaining closeted by performing heterosexuality. "Coming out allows the dominant culture to define—and therefore control— me, my life, and my ability to teach. But so does not coming out" (Wood 2005: 437). The assumption that teachers are emancipated and can empower their students to find freedom is troubling when we begin to grapple with the context in which LGBTQ teachers work and the assumption that coming out is emancipatory in the first place.

In Riley's case, his classmates have always known him to have two moms, so his reminder to his classmates that if the play were about his family both the *Q* and the *U* would have been girls, was not an act of coming out nor was it emancipatory. I do believe that it was empowering though, not because of the phrases he uttered, but because his teacher made space for him to utter the phrases, and she validated the utterances by engaging in the dialogue herself and inviting the other students to engage as well. At the same time, this empowering moment also relied on Riley's entering it already feeling empowered to some extent. It was necessary that he walk into the school assembly and then his classroom with a strong sense of being empowered to continually remind his teacher and his classmates that he does not

have a dad and that he has two moms. It also relies on my and my partner's feeling empowered to continually challenge his teachers and his school to recognize our family and the specific needs we have, like on school emergency contact information forms that leave space for the primary contacts to define their relationship with the student and do not simply say *mother* and *father.*

Another component of troubling the institutionalized power asymmetries in the classroom involves the redefinition of the teacher. The teacher can no longer be seen simply as the teacher but must now be a learner as well. The teacher must learn from the students' knowledge and experiences. This approach is said to allow teachers to learn from new and different perspectives as well as to relearn the material from the position of the students engaged with it in order to develop better methods for meeting the specific needs of the students in the class at the time. This is a theoretically queer positioning of the teacher as it invites fluidity, movement, and uncertainty, but classroom reality does not typically leave room for a queerly positioned teacher given the responsibilities placed on the teacher. Grading, planning curriculum, and enforcing rules are perhaps the most obvious examples that require at least a certain amount of rigidity and certainty.

This raises questions about whether a teacher always knows the subject better at first; for example, Ellsworth (1989) states that she, as a white professor, cannot know the subject of racism better than the students of color in her class who have experienced it their whole lives. Oftentimes LGBTQ students have developed oppositional voices through movements, media, and other social settings. These students do not necessarily need the teacher to help them develop these voices in opposition to heteronormativity and may in fact know this subject better than their teachers, heterosexual or LGBTQ, closeted or out (Malinowitz 1995). Or maybe they just know the subject differently, and it might be productive to view each way of knowing how to oppose heteronormativity as valid and as an important contribution to the class.

Ellsworth (1989) encourages us to ask questions like "What is it that critical pedagogy is asking teachers to learn from their students?" I would add, how are teachers encouraged to expect their students to teach them? It is a common practice for critical teachers to want to "get to know" their students on a more personal level so that they can find ways to meet the needs of the students, bring the students' funds of knowledge into the classroom, and structure the curricula around problems which are relevant to the students in the class. In this sense the teacher expects the students to reveal who they understand themselves to be to their teacher—to teach the teacher who they are. Barnard (2004) reminds us that considering sexuality as a component of our students' identities might be a troubling expectation for teachers to have of their students. He claims that LGBTQ students might be unlikely to reveal their gender identity or sexual orientation to their teachers and that the experience of either revealing or hiding this aspect of their identity can reinscribe marginalization or self-censorship, both of which are painful experiences. This practice does not allow teachers to learn from their students nor does it break down the hierarchical relationships between teachers and students.

Teachers who believe they can bring subjugated knowledges to the forefront of classroom discussions must ask themselves how they can do this when they are not themselves free from their own learned and internalized oppression. This includes both internalized domination and internalized marginalization. Further, how can one bring the knowledges subjugated by heteronormativity to the forefront? And who possesses these knowledges? Is it only queer people, or gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals? Is it people overtly transgressing the binaries embedded within the strict gender system that calls for masculine men and feminine women? What about heterosexuals who are in nonmonogamous relationships or who choose not to marry their life partner or have children? Heteronormativity perpetuates so many rules people (must) live by that any number of us can claim to be subjugated by it. We have certainly all internalized its messages, and these messages have an impact on the way we understand ourselves and perform our identities. So which of these subjugated knowledges gets to move to the front of the classroom? And how can we talk about/through these knowledges without essentializing them because of our own internalized heteronormativity?

When Riley's subjugated knowledge as a "free thinker" gets to come to the front of the classroom, what does this mean? It means that a white boy gets to practice learning the art of taking the floor in his kindergarten classroom, a role he will likely experience over and over again in school given his whiteness and his maleness. It also means that a little boy who wears pink socks and recently expressed fear that someone who does not like gay people might find out that *we* (meaning his moms, and by extension his family) are gay and try to hurt us or take our house away, got to take the floor without fear because he trusted his teacher to value his subjugated knowledge. Critical pedagogues pay special attention to the ways that student voice enters the classroom, which is connected to the use of dialogue as a tool for learning. In this case, Riley spoke up and asked for his teacher to engage his class in a dialogue. He centered his request around a problem he saw with the play he and his classmates watched, and they worked with the problem while identifying additional problems and ignoring or not noticing other problems.

6.4 Student Voice and Dialogue

Riley's subjugated knowledge did move to the front of the classroom because of his ability and willingness to use his voice. Student voice is a central tenet in critical pedagogy, and the call is for students to be able to speak in their "authentic voices" so that they may define themselves—to make themselves visible and intelligible by authoring their world. It is believed by critical pedagogues that this process of self-definition will give students both an identity and a political position, which they can use to be/act as agents of social change (Ellsworth 1989). Students from different social identity groups (including but not limited to race, class, and gender) are encouraged to "speak in self-affirming ways about their experiences and how they

have been mediated by their own social positions and those of others" (Ellsworth 1989: 309).

One problem with encouraging students to use their voices in such a way is the presupposition that the student is "a fully conscious, fully speaking, 'unique, fixed and coherent' self" (Orner 1992: 79), rather than the partially unconscious, fluid, incoherent, and performative self that poststructuralist, performative, and queer theorists have suggested. Another problem is the assumption that there is an "authentic voice" at all; according to poststructuralists this is an impossibility. Calls for the inclusion of "authentic student voices" do not consider the mediating features of language and the unconscious or the ways students, voices, and identities are always multiple, contested, and changing due to the impact of the context in which the speaking occurs (Orner 1992). Orner claims that it is "impossibly naïve" for educators to actually believe that it is possible for a "genuine sharing of voices in the classroom" (p. 81) to exist. Instead she suggests that it is possible to attempt to recognize and acknowledge the power differentials present in the classroom and to make transparent the ways that these power differentials make certain things sayable and doable and other things not so in that particular classroom context. Here is one place where I find queer pedagogy to be a particularly important augmentation for critical pedagogy. Queer pedagogy does invite multiplicity, incoherence, and fluidity by challenging norms that are themselves singular, coherent, and fixed. So, it adds to the ways students are called on to use their voices so that they can speak from multiple positionalities and speak themselves into existences previously unknown, unthinkable, and unspeakable.

Another problem with the call for student voices is the fact that some voices might actually do harm to students in the classroom or to the classroom community. Even in classrooms dedicated to disrupting heteronormativity, homophobia exists. In some cases, a call for the diverse student voices and perspectives to be heard can be read as permission for homophobia to be claimed and defended aloud. Wood (2005) found that students might not do this out loud but rarely held back in their writing. When asked to write a paper exploring a personal dilemma, many of her students wrote about their inability to accept homosexuals because they believe that homosexuality is "wrong," "immoral," "impractical," "against the laws of science," and "perverted" (pp. 432–433). The absence of queerness from critical pedagogy can be damaging, and this is another reason I believe queer pedagogy is a necessary and fruitful augmentation to critical pedagogy.

I do not know if queer critical pedagogy is a complete remedy or prevention for the possible difficulties students can face, but I do believe that it does offer new kinds of possible ways for students to learn to negotiate their voices and to gain a deeper meaning of multiple identities. I am not aware of the kind of harm Wood discusses occurring in Riley's classroom during this discussion. I trust that his teacher would have interrupted overt homophobia, just as I have heard her challenge racism, sexism, and classism within the walls of the school. I do wonder, though, about some of Riley's classmates who are growing up in politically conservative and/or strict religious (primarily LDS or Catholic) families. How are they learning to negotiate using their voices? They seem to genuinely like Riley, and when I see

them in their classroom, my queer identity does not seem to be an issue for them. They chat with me about their day, tell me stories, and ask for help with their work, just as I see them doing with other parents. Do they go home and keep Riley and our family a secret? Are they learning how/when to use silence as a tool for negotiating different spaces populated by competing ideologies? I am left wondering about the ways these students are finding to negotiate differences in beliefs, in identities, and in experiences in order to navigate a multiplicity of spaces, and furthermore what skills they are gaining in terms of critical thinking, communication, and strategic silence through these pedagogical encounters.

It is important to note that calls for student voice can diminish the possibilities for teachers to understand the role of silence in the classroom. A teacher who is primarily concerned with student voice might read silence as either resistance (to the subject matter, the teacher, the class, or the school) or as an inability to intellectually or ideologically engage with the subject matter. Such a teacher is not likely to pay attention to the contextual nature of all classroom interaction or to take note of the ways silences and utterances occur in "complex conjunctures of histories, identities, ideologies, local, national and international events and relations" (Orner 1992: 82). These teachers primarily understand calls for student voice as a way to correct the current and historical silencing of marginalized people including students in schools and in society at large. In this way calls for student voice are linked to empowerment, since "breaking these silences" is empowering. However, without paying careful attention to the context of the classroom and the power dynamics embedded within it, these educators are likely to reinforce the very oppressive practices they are trying to disrupt. For example, asking LGBTQ students to discuss their experiences as LGBTQ people might allow for their voices to be heard and the subject to be discussed, but it might also reinforce the spectacle of LGBTQness and allow heterosexual and cisgender students to listen passively to the painful experiences of their peers without acknowledging their own role in the continuation of heteronormativity (Mayo 2017).

This points to dialogue as a fundamental component of critical pedagogy. As such, dialogue presumes to bring empowered student voices into the classroom in a way that allows all participants—students and teachers—to learn about and from one another. According to Freire (1998), dialogue is the process through which participants are able to name and rename their world. This also means that dialogue allows participants the opportunity to name themselves and their multiple identities. However, there is a tension here, as naming oneself is simultaneously an act of not allowing others to name you and naming yourself based on the discourses available to you—discourses that have been created by others. The question becomes whether one really can name oneself or not. People can pick which words to use to describe themselves, but these words are not their own and their meaning is always contextual. So LGBTQ students who come out in the context of dialogue in a class dedicated to disrupting heteronormativity most likely choose to come out to make themselves visible as a means of disruption, but in doing so they also reify the LGBTQ/non-LGBTQ and out of the closet/in the closet binaries that exist in and perpetuate heteronormativity.

It is further assumed that dialogue "provides the opportunity for the development of tolerance, understanding, and ultimately unity; it can decrease instances of ignorance and racism and other prejudices that are the basis of social division" (Jones 2004: 57). Democratic dialogue attempts to disrupt the usual power dynamics in the classroom so that previously marginalized or silenced voices can be centered, empowered, and heard. However, as Jones points out, context is important here too, for "wider social inequalities" have a significant impact on the possibilities for dialogue in the classroom (Jones 2004: 59). Bryson and de Castell (1993b) discuss how during the dialogues in their class the lesbian and bisexual students and teachers felt like "every ounce of our emotional, intellectual, and social energies were consumed by the problem of accommodating the white heterosexual women's discomfort … despite our repeated insistence that this was not something we would do" (p. 294). The fact that these women had to expend so much energy in the context of the dialogues in the class speaks to the lack of progress made toward the ultimate goal of unity. While the social divisions may have been understood in more complex ways, they certainly were not broken down through the dialogues that were meant to break them down.

Like Orner (1992), Jones (2004) also discusses the importance of silence in the context of a classroom engaged in dialogical practices. In many cases, dialogue centers on the responsibility of the marginalized students in the class to teach the privileged students about themselves and to make the privileged students understand what it is like to be marginalized. Often, the privileged students do not really want to know this, as this knowledge would force them to acknowledge the privilege they have and the impact their privilege and power have on their fellow classmates. It is also common for marginalized students to feel that the privileged students do not understand them because they do not know the same language. In many cases, this is because the language of the classroom is the language of the dominant culture and may not be the primary language of the marginalized students. In other cases, this is because the privileged students do not understand the codes, jargon, and terminology used by the marginalized group. For example, when discussing homophobia and heterosexism, LGBTQ students might have to teach or translate the "language of gay culture" (Leap 1999: 259) for their heterosexual counterparts. Likewise, Riley had to translate his free-thinking language for his teacher and classmates.

"Given that [marginalized] students seldom have the duty, desire, or ability to take on the task of teaching slow or recalcitrant [privileged] classmates, many of them sensibly avoid its demands and remain silent" (Jones 2004: 61). Others, like one student in Bryson and de Castell's (Bryson and de Castell 1993b) class, speak up against having to teach their privileged counterparts. One student pointed out her lack of interest in doing this teaching and the lack of time and patience she had for being expected to do so. She stated, "Straight women have had all of their lives to deal with their homophobia and their privilege. I now have 6 weeks to learn everything about my life" (p. 294). Students and teachers are invested in and empowered by dialogue to varying degrees and for a host of reasons, and when queerness enters

the equation this is perhaps even more emphatically the case given the powerful grasp of heteronormativity.

It is true that Riley initiated the dialogue and in doing so created a space for his own voice as well as the voices of his classmates. His teacher did have to sanction and facilitate the dialogue, but she could do so by opening it with a phrase like, "Riley told me he did not think the play we just saw was a very 'free-thinker' play." She could then invite Riley to explain what he meant by that and then ask others to add their opinions to the discussion. Jackson (2010) discusses what she refers to as "naturally queer" moments in the classroom. These are moments during which heteronormativity is destabilized through everyday (seemingly mundane) interactions, instructional examples, or student discussions. She points to the "effort and courage it took for [LGBTQ teachers] to foster an atmosphere where 'natural queerness' can occur" (p. 46). This is not just true for LGBTQ teachers though, as in many states all teachers run the risk of censure for including queer issues in their curricula. It is true that the regulations and responsibilities teachers must negotiate in order to create opportunities for queer critical pedagogy in their classrooms are confusing and even contradictory.[4] When teachers are left to sift through these policies with little institutional support, many choose to take no risks and disallow discussions like the one Riley and his classmates and teacher engaged in.

Other teachers find ways to weave these conversations into their daily classroom practices by instigating them themselves or by taking advantage of the opportunities offered by students who instigate the conversations. One important question becomes: how are Riley's teachers and classmates finding ways to position Riley as a spokesperson when issues related to "free thinking" come up (because they know he will speak up, and they therefore do not have to)? Is his presence letting them off the hook in some ways? And is the net gain afforded by his diligent reminders about "free thinking" worth the emotional toll it might take on him and the responsibility it relieves his peers from having to shoulder?

[4] Riley attends a public school in Utah, where the State Board of Education Rules prohibit "the advocacy of homosexuality." Further Utah State Board of Education Rule R277-474-6-D states, "Utah school educators may … respond to spontaneous student questions for the purpose of providing accurate data or correcting inaccurate or misleading information or comments made by students in class regarding human sexuality. An educator may not intentionally elicit comments or questions about matters subject to parental consent requirements under this policy. Responses permitted under this section must be brief, factual, objective and in harmony with content requirements of this policy regarding the importance of marriage and family, abstinence from sexual activity before marriage, and fidelity after marriage." At the same time, Rule R277-515-3 includes sexual orientation in the list of student identities that are protected from exclusion from programs or denial of benefits. Further, "an educator … may not engage in a course of conduct that would encourage a student(s) to develop a prejudice on these grounds or any others," and Rule R277-515-4 makes educators responsible for preventing harassment or discriminatory conduct and for "demonstrat[ing] respect for diverse perspectives, ideas, and opinions and encourag[ing] contributions from a broad spectrum of school and community sources."

6.5 Growing Queer Growing Critical—Pedagogy, Voices, Thinkers, Moments

Whatever we think about the roles that Riley, his teacher, his classmates, and others played in this scenario, it is true that the moment did not happen in a vacuum. It was not spontaneous and it was not isolated. This moment required many prior moments of preparation. It required Riley to teach his teacher what he meant when at various times throughout the school year he said "We need to have a lesson on free thinking." It required his teacher to incorporate his language about free thinking into her vocabulary and to be willing to listen for him to use it and to use it herself. It required my partner and me to support Riley in developing an identity as a free thinker and to help him create a language he could use to describe and operationalize this identity. I think it also required that Riley be a student in a school that is not predominantly LDS and that has many teachers and administrators who are dedicated to projects of social justice (at least to some extent), which required that we move across town for him to attend this school.

That said, there is probably something to be said for the queer-raised child and our family's commitment to questioning the norms we bump up against as well as the ones we rely on. We actually talk about these things at the dinner table, in the car between home and school, in the grocery story, and at the playground. As parents we pose problems and question norms, and we teach our children to do this as well. Most importantly I believe we listen intently to them when they engage in this behavior, and we participate in their thinking and acting. This is part of how we nurture ourselves and survive places and times that feel terribly hopeless or troublesome. It is how we grow more queer and more critical together, as a family, and in our own individual ways.

So, while this moment of queer critical pedagogy definitely happened in such a way that it offered possibilities for the disruption of heteronormativity in this particular kindergarten class, it did not happen solely because of a commitment to critical pedagogy or queer pedagogy. These commitments are not enough given the heteronormative contexts in which we exist. I do not know if this moment had an obvious lasting impact. Later that day when I picked Riley up from his after-school program, his friend Arlene asked the same question she asks every day when I pick him up, "Why does Riley have two moms?" Riley smiled at me with anticipation—he and Arlene both know that I have a different answer every day. That day I simply said, "Because he's lucky." Again, we can see the paradox. This daily ritual has created many moments to critically disrupt heteronormativity, but only because Arlene, Riley, and their friends already understand this heteronormativity all too well. I think, though, that they also have an understanding about this heteronormativity as harmful and as something that they can challenge in all sorts of surprising and delightful ways. For example, in Hartmann 2017, Jack Hartmann's *Kid Music Channel,* the relationship of Q and U is shifted to friendship.

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