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SHH, Don't Speak: The Act of Overcoming Silencing and Empowering Acts of Education

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Abstract

Silencing appears in various avenues – classroom interactions amongst the teacher and student, hospital situations, gender/sexual identities, bullying, mental health struggles, and other forms, thus relegating individuals to the margins. This paper utilizes queer theory and critical race feminism to examine how dis(abilities) are positioned in relation to normative societal structures. Through the methodological approaches of autoethnography and narrative inquiry, we examine our stories of marginalization and silencing that have occurred in various facets of our lives. For the field of education, these stories can provide a means for other educators to invoke self-reflection on classroom practice as a way of disrupting dominant discourses that foster marginalization and silencing of students.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Education, Queer Theory, Silencing

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Silencing appears in various avenues – classroom interactions amongst the teacher and student, hospital situations, gender/sexual identities, bullying, mental health struggles, and other forms, thus relegating individuals to the margins. This paper utilizes queer theory and critical race feminism to examine how dis(abilities) are positioned in relation to normative societal structures. Through the methodological approaches of autoethnography and narrative inquiry, we examine our stories of marginalization and silencing that have occurred in various facets of our lives. For the field of education, these stories can provide a means for other educators to invoke self-reflection on classroom practice as a way of disrupting dominant discourses that foster marginalization and silencing of students. Keywords: Autoethnography, Education, Queer Theory, Silencing

Individuals with mental health "disorders," learning disabilities, physical disabilities, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), as well as those with non-normative gender and sexual identities, face stigmas as a result of societal structures (Jackson & Mohr, 2015), limiting what can be thought, performed, and discussed. As a result, non-normative individuals are often relegated to the margins of society (Thornicroft, 2006). However, in more recent years, discussions have taken place within the academic community about how such (dis)abilities can actually be assets to language educators, rather than detriments (Smagorinsky, 2011).

In this article, we discuss our individual experiences with trauma-induced anxiety, ADHD, learning disabilities, and non-normative sexual and gender identities and how these conditions affected our teaching. Due to our personal experiences, we can relate to students who have felt silenced in various situations: Coda, due to his total body paralysis and trauma-induced anxiety resulting from Guillain-Barre Syndrome (GBS), where the immune system attacks the peripheral nervous system, thus invoking temporary paralysis, and the conflict between teaching professionalism and his non-normative sexual identity; Robbins, because of her facial reconstructive jaw surgery that left her temporarily unable to speak and associated anxiety issues, past experiences with childhood bullying, the experience of being gendered as a teacher, and her spatially-based learning disability. Although societal norms may exclude these attributes, we have observed the value of them in our teaching and hope we can help other educators do the same. The following is the research question we pursued for this study: How can our stories about experiences with (dis)ability help us and other educators who want to connect to students who have been silenced because of their race, class, embodiment, gender, (dis)ability, and/or other aspects of identities?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual frameworks that influence our study are queer theory (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1978/1990; Jagose, 1996) and critical race feminism (Erevelles & Minear, 2013; Samuels, 2013), which have influences from feminist, critical, and poststructural thought. Specifically, we wish to explore how our own fluid identities affect our interactions and

relationships with students and also how we may "queer" definitions of identities that are stigmatized, such as being learning (dis)abled, having a mental health disorder, and gender and sexual identities. Many of these aspects of identity are fluid rather than fixed, yet they influence everyday interactions and can lead to feelings of being silenced. Only through dialogue about silencing, deconstructing identity labels, and offering different possibilities, can we change an educational landscape that excludes certain identities, while privileging others.

Queer Theory

Following the gay and lesbian liberation movement, which sought to affirm a gay and lesbian identity through acceptance (Sullivan, 2003), queer theory is "anti-normative and seeks to subvert, challenge and critique a host of taken for granted 'stabilities' in our social lives" (Browne & Nash, 2010, p. 7). Drawing upon Foucault (1978/1990), queer theory views sexuality and gender as discursively produced, while problematizing the dichotomous oppositions produced in and through discourse. Therefore, "from the poststructuralist queer viewpoint, the fact that history makes sexualities finally emerged as more compelling, and perhaps more vital, then the idea that sexualities make history" (Armstrong, 2008, p. 88). Thus, queer theory is attentive to the ways in which discourse and power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980) function to create "truths" around sexuality and gender.

Previously a pejorative term, queer is now a way to call "into question conventional understandings of sexual identity by deconstructing the categories, oppositions, and equations that sustain them" (Jagose, 1996, p. 97). Within queer theory, the essentialist view of gender has been disrupted and instead posited as "a repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of a substance, of a natural sort of being" (Butler, 1990, p. 45). For Butler, gender is not something natural or that one is born with, but rather a performance regulated by social norms and institutions, like schools, that utilize rituals such as the prom to reinscribe heteronormative gender and sexuality roles (Pascoe, 2007). However, departing from these conditioned norms results in policing or surveilling of bodies (Pascoe, 2007), thus determining who is included or excluded in the discourse. However, queer theory provides a way of "constantly questioning this social order" (DePalma, 2013, p. 1). In our study, merging Foucault's (1977) notion of the Panopticon with queer theory provides a way of thinking about how surveillance and scrutiny of individuals' gender and sexuality performances relate to the pressure placed upon teachers who perform while constantly being surveilled.

"Queering" (Dis)ability

Through the approach of queer theory, we are problematizing perceptions of both mental health disorders and mental processing (dis)abilities. Many educational and literacy researchers, especially those who operate from a poststructural perspective, are now beginning to question the labels behind learning (dis)abilities. Alvermann and Mallozzi (2010) noted that "researchers using poststructural theories contest a simplified notion of reading disability and seek to deconstruct and expose unexamined assumptions about the very structures that maintain the existence of a reading disability" (p. 491). Therefore, as educators, we should continue to question the labeling of our students as (dis)abled, since they are often very capable in areas that are not within the realm of their learning disabilities. Thus, the concept of being "disabled" is subjective, and based on societal norms.

Although Robbins' learning disability is visual-spatial rather than reading-based, both authors can appreciate the desire to deconstruct labels and to consider the whole person rather than the label. Interpretive research related to reading disabilities attempts to understand

individuals with reading disabilities and the people with whom they interact, whereas critical researchers focus on sociopolitical and sociocultural influences that contribute to the labels of academic disability (Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2010). The poststructural paradigm calls for a deconstruction of labeling disabled bodies, and of reinforcing the idea that differences are normal (Alvermann & Mallozzi, 2010). Therefore, deconstructing the term "disabled" could be more productive as the prefix "dis" invokes negative associations that can remain with an individual throughout life.

Critical Race Feminism

Critical race feminist theory is an approach to understanding "how individuals located perilously at the intersections of race, class, gender, and disability are constituted as non-citizens and (no) bodies by the very social institutions (legal, educational, and rehabilitational) that are designed to protect, nurture, and empower them" (Erevelles & Minear, 2013, p. 354). For the purposes of our study, critical race feminist theory gives us a way to examine the multiple identities constituted within an individual and how these categories intertwine. Furthermore, in relation to our students and experiences, critical race feminist theory provides a means of interrogating social institutions and their normative standards that marginalize students of different backgrounds.

Both authors have what are generally considered to be "hidden disabilities", specifically learning disabilities, ADHD, and/or temporary or trauma-related anxiety issues. Bringing in Foucault's (1977) theory of the Panopticon and the societal surveillance involved, Samuels (2013) noted that "non-visibly disabled people may feel that our choice is between passing and performing the dominant culture's stereotypes of disability" (p. 326). It can be difficult to occupy the world as a person of high functioning anxiety, depression, ADHD, and learning disabilities, as society encourages us to keep our struggles silent. As Samuels explained, queerness and invisible disabilities have the common link of people sometimes feeling reluctant to disclose these attributes because of how these aspects of one's identity will be perceived. Additionally, being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual, Queer, Intersex, Asexual/Ally (LGBTQIA) can be considered a "disability" in relation to heteronormative expectations and assumptions.

Methodology

In this research, we employed the methodologies of autoethnography and narrative inquiry. Utilizing these methodologies coincides with our assertion that it is appropriate to self-examine our pedagogical practices, as related to our identities, so as to understand our relationship to students who have been silenced. For the purposes of our study, we received notification from IRB that approval was not necessary because it did not fit the federal definition of human subjects research.

Autoethnography "is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). It gives researchers an avenue to explore their personal connections and investments in "identities, experiences, relationships, and/or cultures," as these ideas can interrelate (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015, pp. 15-16). Over time, the boundaries between autoethnography, autobiography, and memoir have begun to blur. However, the research-based focus on the self as related to a cultural group is what makes autoethnography distinct from creative nonfiction (Chang, 2008). We chose autoethnography for our study due to its emphasis on self-reflection and contribution to our research. Typically, autoethnographic work is written in the first-person voice, includes elements of ethnography, and specifically focuses

on the writer's own experience of a cultural group or interest (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

In regard to the differences between autoethnography and creative nonfiction, Narayan (2012) stated, "Both creative nonfiction and ethnography mix stories and ideas, but creative nonfiction often highlights the storytelling, while conventional academic ethnography more closely follows disciplinary conventions for citation and argument, with more emphasis on engaging ideas" (pp. 12-13). As Narayan (2012) suggested, there are many possibilities between both autoethnography and creative nonfiction. Therefore, our methodological approach was a combination of the more creative and evocative ethnographic approaches highlighted by Ellis and Bochner (2000) and the ones more related to traditional ethnography that Chang (2008) employs.

Through autoethnography, we are able to question the dichotomous oppositions of the self/other and subject/object that exist in more traditional ethnographic work. As Wolf (1992) noted, "The Other is a perfect concept for postmodernists because it is constantly having to be redefined, is nearly always vague in its boundaries, and is as luxuriant in meaning as it is constrained by specificity" (p. 12). Feminist and queer theory researchers who challenge binaries and power dynamics question the traditional male/patriarchal concept of the Other, which is "something to be attacked, whereas the anthropologists' Other is the culture under study, and something 'to create a relationship with' and to preserve, and/or interpret" (Wolf, 1992, p. 12). By writing an autoethnography about our moments related to silencing, we hope to dispute the author/reader binary that poststructural theorists questioned and the emotion/intellect binary that is common in positivist thought. Instead, our postmodern feminist autoethnographic work is based on relationships, both with students and our chosen profession, and self-reflection on how we interact with school and university cultures.

The other methodology used to recount and analyze our past personal teaching stories is narrative inquiry. According to Clandinin (2013), narrative inquiry is "the story of experience as a story" (p. 13) and "an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (p. 17). Narrative inquiry, particularly autobiographical narrative inquiry, exhibits similarities to autoethnography (Clandinin, 2013). Moreover, narrative inquiry and autoethnography both often receive credit "with further legitimizing the subjective role of the researcher in the research process" and encourage qualitative researchers to further consider "the form and quality of our writing" (Leavy, 2013, p. 33). For the purposes of our study, memories and past written accounts served as field notes for the analysis process.

To create our narrative accounts of silencing in educational settings, both authors revisited past journal entries we had written while teaching in K-12 and university settings. As we read these past journal entries, we looked for cultural themes (Chang, 2008) that emerged based on experiences we and our students had overcoming the effects of silencing. We considered the theoretical frames of (dis)ability studies, critical race feminism, and queer theory as we looked for and notated key thematic moments in these field notes.

As we turned these interim texts (Clandinin, 2013) into evocative ethnographic accounts (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), we wrote our stories with narrative arcs to show pivotal moments of learning that we experienced as educators. Also, we fictionalized details of our stories and created composite characters based on our past colleagues and students, so identities would be protected. When we constructed the narrative accounts below of our pedagogical narratives, we studied ourselves in relationship to our school cultures and considered how we were questioning norms of (dis)ability, as well as other labels. Additionally, as we edited the finalized stories, we considered how they related not only to our theory, but how they complimented each other and contributed to answering our research question.

Coda's Story

GUILLAIN-BARRE SYNDROME

When I hear someone utter those three words, the traumatic experience that I endured automatically surfaces. On February 1st, 2010, I awoke with a sudden onset of pain that changed my life. I did not know what was happening, but I knew something was wrong. That day, it was difficult for me to walk or to do any type of activity. Fortunately, my mother had decided to visit a few days prior and was still staying at my apartment. When looking back at this moment, without her, I may not have survived. As the pain became worse and my ability to walk or move deteriorated, my mother decided that going to the hospital would help. On February 3rd, 2010, I entered the hospital and had a prolonged stay until May 19th, 2010. During that time, GBS took over my body, leaving me unable to walk, talk, move, or perform bodily functions. I was regulated to a hospital bed and machines were part of my survival. But, that is the nature of GBS, when the immune system turns on you and attacks the peripheral nervous system, leaving you unable to do anything. However, little by little, I began to recover. GBS was not able to keep my persistent personality captive for very long.

After the long road to recovery, I enrolled in another bachelor's degree at the local university. While enrolled as a student again, I suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), trauma induced anxiety, and other issues that were related to my experience with GBS. But, I was able to overcome these obstacles and graduated in May 2011. While dealing with school, as well as other barriers, I met my partner. Before GBS, I had never been in a same-sex relationship. However, this syndrome changed my perspective and gave me the confidence to push back against the normative discourses that had been imparted upon me throughout my life. As a child, my mother adhered to strict gender roles, which were enforced and policed. Also, the school environment, like my home environment, was full of heteronormative gender and sexual roles. Divulging from normative notions of sexuality results in policing of identities (Pascoe, 2007), which was something that I tried to avoid in my personal, as well as professional, life.

When I obtained my first teaching job in August 2011, I worked in a small, rural school in my corner of the Southeastern United States. While working as a Spanish teacher, I quickly learned how to maintain a public and private life (Gray, 2013) in regard to my sexuality. Also, my public life as a teacher entailed ensuring that I adhered to the norms of "teacher professionalism" (Connell, 2015), whereas I performed to the best of my ability so that I would not be fired for my non-normative sexuality. This performance, like Goffman's (1959) performance of the self, was an essential part of my life. During my first year of teaching, I didn't have to worry about the other faculty members, as well as administration, finding out about me since I lived in the next county. However, this all changed when I accepted a job offer from a school close to my home.

HERE'S THE GAY TEACHER. This sentence echoed throughout my mind every day while working at my second job. My private sexual identity was on display for everyone since I lived only a half mile from the school where I taught. The school, just like the previous, was in a rural area, where those who do not align with normative notions of sexuality often remain hidden (Gray, 2013). This isolation that I felt at times, like other gays and lesbians in rural areas (Smith, 1997), was from the environment I lived in where heterosexual relationships were privileged over others, such as mine. Also, while teaching, I had to perform both a private and public identity, since institutionalized heterosexuality is the norm (Jackson, 2007). While navigating the public and hidden identities (Gray, 2013), my anxiety increased dramatically. Oftentimes, I struggled answering students' questions regarding my private life. However, one day, it was brought out into the open, and I could not avoid it any longer.

While my students were working on a project, Kendra (all names are pseudonyms), said to me, "So, you live right up the road, right?" I replied "Yes, I do." Kendra then said, "You have a really nice house. How do you afford that since you're a teacher?" My heart sank at that time and anxiety swept over my thoughts and body like the waves from the ocean rushing onto the shore. After a few seconds, which seemed like an eternity, I said "I have a roommate," which kept my identity private. The roommate that I mentioned was actually my partner. Then, Kendra smiled and said "Ok." However, I knew the "ok" that Kendra surreptitiously said was not an "ok" of affirmation, but rather a way of saying, "You lied." As I would later find out in the semester, both Kendra and I led private and public lives with our relationships.

Although I tried to maintain distance between the two identities and to keep my relationship a secret, it proved to be a cumbersome task in a small town. Eventually, it seemed as if the whole town and school knew, but never said anything. Throughout my interactions with others in my school, many would often refer to my "friend," which became a signifier for my partner. This led to many questions that I would often ponder when I was around my colleagues, students, and parents. Was my non-normative sexuality a problem? Would it invoke any disciplinary action if I happened to step out of line and bring it into public view? Will someone do something to my house or car because of this identity label? Although these questions often enveloped my thinking, my hidden identity led to new possibilities that I had not encountered previously – relationships with students who were experiencing the same crisis.

YOU BETTER WATCH OUT FOR HER! Before the semester began during my second year at this school, my fellow colleagues were viewing the list of students in our classes. When I looked at my list, I noticed that Andrea was enrolled in my Spanish I course. Prior to Andrea enrolling in my course, she had been named as a problematic student by my colleagues. While discussing Andrea, teachers would often remark how she never sits down, is constantly distracted, and does not want to complete work. Also, many teachers seemed frustrated with Andrea, as they didn't understand what they could do to help her. To them, she appeared to be capable, but her classroom behavior was quite troublesome. Meanwhile, in other conversations about Andrea, her lesbian identity surfaced and was mentioned as potentially problematic for some of the other teachers due to their Christian backgrounds. Reflecting back on this situation, I often wonder if this was the reason that Andrea and certain teachers did not get along. Was her sexual identity the real issue and not her behavior? Or, was the way in which she was positioned by her other teachers the cause for her inappropriate classroom behavior?

During the first week of classes that semester, I expected some behavioral issues from Andrea as it was the beginning of the school year and everyone was enthusiastic. However, as the semester progressed, I noticed that Andrea was an excellent student in my class. She excelled at the various communicative activities, took an active role by always volunteering to perform in front of the class, and seemed genuinely excited about the Spanish language. It was also during that semester that I became interested in taking my students to Spain as I believed it would be beneficial to their learning and would provide an experience to many students who had never traveled abroad. Andrea, who was enamored with the Spanish language, was one of the very first students to express interest in the trip. I still recall Andrea saying, "I am so excited to go on this trip!" However, as it later transpired, Andrea was not able to go on the trip due to some unforeseen issues.

In the classroom, I was able to provide a space that was comfortable for Andrea, since she often did not feel comfortable within school. Oftentimes, individuals who are not part of the dominant discourses are excluded from the curriculum (Camicia, 2016), thus relegating students like Andrea to the margins. However, I always tried to offer support when Andrea wanted to perform different roles, such as having a wife or girlfriend instead of a boyfriend or husband. Also, I tried to avoid constraining Andrea in the ways in which schools often

discipline and punish students as a way of producing docile bodies (Foucault, 1977). Through fostering an environment where Andrea's identity could be valued, this helped to promote a trusting relationship with me. In my classroom, Andrea knew that she was able to perform or be whomever she wanted and was able to learn about a language that she thought was fascinating. Therefore, Spanish class became a place for not only learning about the target language and culture, but afforded new ways of becoming and being for both of us in an environment where our sexual identities were outside of normative structures. When she was having problems, Andrea often consulted my guidance and looked to me as a mentor. Although we had a student-teacher relationship that was built on mutual trust as a result of our non-normative sexual identities, I still did not speak of my identity directly, but rather in an implicit manner. When discussing how often conservative the area was and how life for individuals of non-normative sexualities could be difficult, I would say "You know how things are around here. That's not really accepted." Although there was silence in conversations around our identities, and I was unable to offer more details about my experiences due to the veil of teacher professionalism (Connell, 2015), we still were able to understand one another. Although my non-normative sexual identity often silenced me, it also fostered relationships with those who were on the margins as well, such as Andrea.

Robbins' Story

An interesting aspect of reflecting back on my K-12 experiences, in order to create vignettes and narrative accounts about silencing, is that I was among the smaller minority group of White female teachers at the middle school where I taught for seven years. Most of the teachers in the building were either White men or Black women, and I was one of the few White women under the age of forty. Therefore, I can appreciate Orrico's (2014) description of ethnography as "an embodied practice" (p. 2), as she had to negotiate the research field as a woman in a very male-dominated space, even though education as a profession is more female-dominated.

During my time as a K-12 teacher, I thought of myself as an educator and as a writer/storyteller, but not as a researcher, even though I was constantly doing research on my subject area and my surroundings without fully realizing it at the time. However, I believe that teaching, much like being an ethnographic researcher, is an embodied practice. My embodiment as a White woman in the South affected my interactions with both the students and the staff. Also, as one of the younger teachers in the building, people sometimes made assumptions about me, particularly since I look younger than my chronological age. I sometimes felt that parents and even colleagues were quicker to judge my actions and decisions than some other teachers because of my embodiment, especially since they knew I was an unmarried woman without children.

I distinctly remember a lesson I taught the students about writing a cover letter and résumé while we were on our technical writing unit. This particular interaction demonstrates teaching as an embodied practice, as well as my methodological practice of using narrative to depict examples of feminist teaching and interactions. One of our assignments was to write a thank you letter to a person who interviewed you for your dream job. I told them to think about what they wanted the employer to know about them, why they wanted that job, and how they could use language to represent themselves well. In addition to an interview, the cover letter and the thank you letter contribute to the first impressions that a workplace forms about a person. I used my outfit as an example. That day, I was wearing a silk black shirt, a pink sweater, and nice dark khaki pants.

"Pretend you have not interacted with me yet and do not know me. Look at my outfit. What would you assume about me based solely on the way I am dressed?"

Some of them actually made statements that were pretty accurate, such as:
"You like to be professional, and you take your job seriously."
"You like to be comfortable."
"You are generally a happy person."
Some I did not agree with, such as "you're kind of a country person." I decided just to take that one with a grain of salt.

"See, we all make assumptions about people based on how they are dressed. Clothing certainly does not tell us the whole story about a person, but it is a start. With your writing, it is the same way. A brief cover letter or thank you letter does not tell a company or organization everything about you, but it gives them an overview. Based on your résumé and first letters, the employers will make assumptions about how professional you are, how well educated you are, and even what kind of family you come from."

"But that's not fair," one student commented. "They shouldn't assume all of this about us just because of how I wrote."

"You're right, Ashley," I replied honestly. "It's not fair, but it's life. We also shouldn't make assumptions about people just because of how they are dressed, but it does happen in the real world."

Reflection

Without realizing it, I was not only teaching my students technical writing skills, but White middle class values as well. The White middle class values I have been taught encourage people to be successful in school so as to attend college and eventually obtain a "white collar" professional job. Some individuals eventually decide that this path is not what is best for them, and that is fine. However, as a secondary teacher, I was encouraged to prepare students for this path, so they would have the option to pursue it. I thought I was helping them, but I wonder now, was I participating in a colonizing process? Also, it was interesting to hear what they thought about my physical appearance based on what I was wearing and how I presented myself in front of the class. I was dressed in a way that was deemed appropriate for a White middle class school teacher, and yet without knowing it at the time, I was performing gender, in addition to performing as a teacher. Therefore, my embodiment, in addition to the fact that I worked for an ideological state apparatus of a school (Althusser, 1971), influenced the values I imparted upon my students, along with writing lessons.

Butler (1990) discussed gender as a performance that is different from the biological sex that is assigned at birth. Lucal (1999) expanded on this idea in her autoethnographic piece about being a woman who does not fit all of the descriptors of a female and about why gender binaries are problematic. As a female teacher in a diverse public middle school, I was given mixed messages about how to present myself in terms of gender descriptors. More so than male teachers, my female colleagues and I were encouraged to dress very nicely, and skirts and panty hose were preferred over khaki pants. However, the male teachers at the school could wear khakis and collared polo shirts and be considered by most as dressing appropriately. Khakis and a more casual long-sleeved shirt, I was explicitly told, were "fine" for a casual Friday, but that outfit was not nice enough for weekday dress.

When I was first hired at this school, many of my colleagues and I were still fairly new to teaching, regardless of their age (mine was 26 at the time), and we, therefore, did not always have a lot of disposable income. Yet, we were still being told how to present our embodiments by spending money on clothing. I did not always feel that I could express myself fully through my clothing. Therefore, I felt that a part of my creative spirit was silenced in the public school environment, even though I was one of the authority figures. How much of a dress code is truly necessary, and how much are we silencing our students and educators alike by enforcing

it? I continue to ask myself this question, as someone who has taught both secondary level students and pre-service teachers.

In terms of classroom management, the message I received in workshops throughout my ten years in public school settings contradicted the female representation by clothing. Speak in a deep and even voice. Do not show emotion, because showing emotion conveys weakness. Keep your posture in an upright position. We were essentially receiving messages to behave in very male-like manners in order to be perceived as authoritative by the students, yet our dress and presentation had to be very female-oriented. I felt as though I was being asked to silence my emotions. I had memories of my childhood, when kids teased me for having teeth that stuck out and I was told that I was being "too sensitive." I am a language arts teacher, an emotional subject, and it is very hard not to bring emotion into the classroom when teaching writing well. Yet the messages I received, both implicitly and explicitly, were to keep this part of myself contained.

The contradictions were confusing to me, yet the longer I taught, the more I felt comfortable in a dress and presenting in a mannerism that was teacher-like, but also reflected who I am as a person. As Crenshaw (1991, 2003) noted, when discussing intersectionality and identity, multiple aspects of a person's identity can lead to discrimination. As a female teacher, I sometimes felt silenced, and even discriminated against, because of my gender, as the school was almost equal in terms of male and female teachers. However, male teachers rarely received comments from administrators regarding how they were dressed.

As female teachers, though, my colleagues and I received multiple messages: Don't wear your skirts too short as you do not want to be seen as a sexual being. Leggings are not pants, so do not wear them as pants. Make sure your blouse is not too low-cut. Khakis and a long-sleeved striped shirt are not dressy enough for a regular workday. As a young single female White teacher, there were only so many outfits I could afford to buy and could wear without being shamed in one way or another. Additionally, my mannerisms in some ways had to contradict my physical dress. Shaming is a precursor of silencing.

As a female teacher, my body was being policed, in addition to the manner of presenting myself to my students. Foucault's (1977) idea of the Panopticon was very apparent in the schools in which I taught, as the students and I experienced policing of our bodies. I cannot help but wonder how my interactions would have been different if I were within a different embodiment. Would I have taught my students the same middle-class values in conjunction to job preparation technical writing lessons? Would my clothing choices have faced as much scrutiny as I felt during that time in my professional life?

To me, the act of writing these experiences as narrative accounts makes them accessible to others and also for me to reflect upon how my teaching truly was an embodied practice. I was in a space in which I was the non-majority in terms of my race and gender intersection, and in a space where I received messages to look feminine and act masculine, despite the sex I was assigned at birth. Through reflecting on these storied narrative experiences from a feminist perspective, particularly a critical race feminism lens, I better understand my past experiences as a K12 public school teacher and how they now affect me as a scholar. Being a female should not have hindered me in a profession that is female-dominated overall, but at times, I felt that it did.

The Boat Afloat

(July 2012) I unpacked my closet and organized my classroom to prepare for the coming school year. As I sorted through my desk, I came upon some notes my students wrote at the end of the previous school year. My colleague Jason and I had the students write letters

or mini-squares of advice to next year's sixth graders. It was interesting to see what the students had written about their other teachers and about me:

"Don't bully, or Ms. Robbins will get you back." Next to this statement was a picture of one kid teasing another to the point of tears. Nearby, a stick figure Ms. Robbins is standing with her hands on her hips, saying, "Come here." I suppose they know that bullying is one thing that I will not tolerate. Because of my own experiences with it, I knew of its scarring effects. Seeing that caption made me think of a memory from the previous school year.

(January 2012) *One day, Kera walked back into the class from the restroom and had a piece of toilet paper stuck to her shoe that trailed all the way back into the hallway. Yes, it's funny, until it happens to you. I can understand holding back snickers, but Christopher and Xander were laughing in an over the top way and making rude comments under their breath, to the point of bringing Kera to tears.*

Jack said to them, "you guys are so mean to everyone."

I am glad he said that because sometimes it is the beautiful, athletic and popular kids, the "Alphas," who think they can bring others down. When other kids in the class joined in the excessive laughter, I took a deep breath to keep myself from just exploding with anger. I'm a 31-year-old woman, I told myself, and these are children. I need to set the example, as an adolescent version of myself might have snickered too.

I remembered myself as a young teen, who had to have major surgery to correct a huge overbite that an expander and braces alone could not fix. I was called chipmunk lady, rabbit, and other names denoting not-so-attractive animals. I felt so small. I had the surgery in 1995 as a young teen, and my cheeks were so swollen that summer, I was afraid to go out in public where schoolmates might see me. I just couldn't endure additional name calling round after overcoming the physical and psychological trauma of a major surgery before I could even drive a car. Not all of these thoughts entered my mind during this thirty second period in which I had to take a deep breath and decide how I was going to handle the situation. Yet inevitably, these past experiences rather strongly influenced the emotions I had about the situation.

Once I had collected myself, I put my hands on my hips, looked at them, and said without raising my voice, "You know, at the beginning of the year, I thought this was going to be a nice class. Right now, I don't feel that way."

They all fell silent, partly because I was talking in my stern teacher voice, partly because they saw the truth behind my words and knew I was speaking from the heart. In hindsight, I'm glad I did not yell at them because if I had, I think the situation would have gone really differently.

Partly, I think I reacted strongly myself because I felt for Kera. It is not easy to be the heavyset girl in the class in addition to being one of the only White Protestants in a room, as Kera and I both were in that class. She was me in elementary and early middle school: the girl with the pretty face and luscious curls who has to wear the plus size clothes. For me, I had bucked teeth and braces on top of that, which made my load even harder to carry. Oftentimes, when you are significantly heavier than others around you, you feel small, simply because people's cruel words can make you feel small. Even though the kids were not blatantly picking on Kera's size, she was a shy and self-conscious child anyway, so every blow dealt was harder to take.

My load became lighter to carry as I got older: I got braces, had jaw surgery, and slimmed down due to a healthier diet, distance track, and dance classes. Now, I wear the "curvy" sizes, but not the "plus" sizes, and though I oscillate between curvaceous and chubby, I have remained roughly "American Average sized" throughout my adult life. Although I complain sometimes, in reality, I feel grateful that people no longer make fun of me for my weight, at least not to my face. As you get older, people's sizes vary more, and people also

become kinder. Yet sometimes, I look in the mirror, or I go to a new social situation, and I feel like the significantly overweight, bucked toothed little girl all over again.

I don't want the Kera's of the world to feel the way Kera did during the toilet paper incident later in life, which is why I fought for them as their teacher. Some of the Alpha popular kids might not have liked me that school year, but for the most part, they were aware that they had to respect me as a teacher and as an authority figure, as talking badly to an adult is a much more serious offense than insulting a peer.

Valentine's Day 2012, the same year I taught Kera (about a month after the toilet paper incident): I was single and feeling somber, so I came to work dressed in a black skirt, black leggings, black shoes, and a black and grey sweater. I was not looking forward to the day, especially knowing I would have to deal with overly sugared-up sixth graders who always find a way to sneak candy into class. After a certain point, you wonder if it's a battle worth fighting, but if you don't curtail the candy, you pay the price by fifth period, when Kera's class comes in.

The class as a whole was hyper that dreadful V-Day, and I made them re-write rituals and routines for class expectations, and they had to stay in class an extra two minutes to compensate for time missed at the beginning. In spite of these things, Kera made my day worth it when she gave me a snowy glass ball with a bear inside of it and a candy bag with a note on it that said, "my favorite teacher."

Bullies of the world exist in all shapes and sizes. They are the sixth graders who pick on vulnerable peers. They are the high school "friends" who steal each other's boyfriends and want to cheat off of your papers to get better grades themselves without having to do the hard work. They are the catty college hall mates who talk about you behind your back. They are the boys and men who lead you on, and then ditch you for girls who look more like the cover models of Mademoiselle Magazine. Yet I hope that one day, the little Kera's of the world will grow up to become surer of themselves, and to become leaders in the fights against bullies.

Twenty years ago, a brunette version of Kera was growing up in Flint, Michigan, and facing some of the same problems. Now, she's decided to join a metaphorical House of Gryffindor from the Harry Potter world and show that even those who don't have everything naturally can get much of what they want through confidence and will.

(July 2012) "Don't bully other kids. Ms. Robbins doesn't like that." I notice a theme forming here. Really, I'm glad they know me as a teacher who won't tolerate bullying.

"Don't talk back to the teachers because they don't like that. It just gets you in trouble."

"Ms. Robbins and Mr. Johnson are the best teachers ever." Of course, at least one kid will say that to be a sycophant.

I continued to look through the papers and found pictures some girls had colored for me last year. I appreciated it, even though they probably colored the pictures while they were supposed to be doing class work. I also found a handful of old poems and Christmas/birthday cards students had written for me over the years. I decided these needed to be laminated and placed on the wall of fame next to my desk, where I keep the certificates of my years teaching, writing awards, reading bowl awards, and other accolades. To me, creations that students took time to make for me are more valuable than any professional and scholastic awards I have won.

My favorite, though, was a picture that John drew for me. It had a large Titanic-like ship sailing across the ocean that said, "I am going to miss you, Ms. Robbins." His boat is not sinking anymore, I thought to myself. It is floating above water.

I taught John two years in a row because he was retained in the sixth grade during the 2011-2012 school year. John had suffered from depression caused by his parents' separation and a lack of connection to the other kids at school. Yet he and his friend Eric, who suffered from ADHD, had a fascination with the Titanic ship. On Fridays, if they had caught up with their work in my class, I would let them go to the media center to research and write a book

about the Titanic. Neither of these students was academically successful in the traditional sense, yet to me, they were enjoyable to have in class because they offered new and different perspectives.

I understood Eric's struggles because I too was diagnosed with ADHD, as well as a spatially-based visual processing disorder, at a young age. I've learned a lot of coping strategies, in part because I was lucky enough to attend a private school where my mom taught from kindergarten until eighth grade, and I was in smaller classes and got more specialized attention. However, even as an adult, I know I sometimes see the world differently than some people. I have learned, though, not to see my so-called disorders from a deficit perspective, but to embrace them as a way to relate to others who struggle and to encourage my own creativity. I felt for Eric, though, and for the way in which he and other ADHD students sometimes feel misunderstood.

Occasionally, when they were not working on the book, John would draw pictures of the Titanic. In many of these pictures, the Titanic was sinking. Therefore, I was delighted to see a new picture of John's boat where it was sailing and not sinking. Maybe it's because of his friendship with Eric, and maybe it's because Ms. Walters, Ms. Connolly, and I hung in there with him for two years to help him succeed. At any rate, I was happy to see that John would soon start seventh grade with a boat afloat. Throughout the year, I believe John felt silenced because of his feelings of sadness, and drawing was a way to communicate his emotions with others. By the end of the year, though, he was able to use both pictures and words to better communicate how he was feeling. As an English teacher, I can appreciate students using visual literacy and words to tell stories, especially as they are overcoming difficult emotional situations, as John was that year.

After I had facially reconstructive jaw surgery during the summer of 1995, I went through a roller coaster emotional period afterwards. A part of me was thrilled that my face and teeth that caused me to be made fun of by my peers for resembling a "chipmunk" or a "rabbit" would finally be "fixed," although how faces and teeth look are definitely influenced by society in addition to health concerns. But that summer, I literally felt silenced because the surgery left me temporarily unable to speak. People who did not know me or the situation sometimes assumed I was mentally disabled because my speech came out slurred and incoherent.

I was embarrassed to be seen in public right after the surgery because my face was so swollen and had a very non-normative look to it. I would not even go to the movies with my family, unless we went to the theater on the south side of the county where I would not run into anyone we knew. Additionally, I had to be on an all liquid diet, which led to food issues after the liquid diet period was over. Several months after the surgery, I went through a period of mild to moderate depression. I was frustrated about the silence I experienced during my recovery months, and also the silence I felt for not being able to express the before and after effects of having my face completely altered to other people.

When I was a child, I felt like my boat was sinking, and sometimes, I still struggle emotionally to keep it afloat. During my adult life, I have intermittently struggled with anxiety, in part because of these past life experiences. I felt John's pain, and I'm glad I could understand it enough to persevere with him.

(July 2012) Looking through these captions, I began to have positive hopes for the 2012-2013 school year. I hoped that any students who started the year with baggage like John's would feel better about themselves and their accomplishments by the end. Hopefully, I thought, John's sailing boat is a metaphor not only for himself, but also for where we are both going.

The next caption I saw struck a chord: "You don't have to be scared. The teachers have it under control."

How sad, but true, it is that kids are initially scared to come to school, and some parents are even scared to send them. The world is not always a safe place, particularly for those of us who suffer from learning disabilities and short or long term mental health issues. But maybe, through dialogue, we will create an educational world that embraces difference and where kids will not be scared into silence.

Reflection

Reading these anecdotes a few years after being in the public schools, it is interesting to see which themes repeatedly surface. Reflecting upon these stories, I understand how the students saw me as a teacher who fought for those who felt oppressed in school. Kera might have felt stigmatized because of her size and her race, and the students seemed to capitalize on her sensitivity. John struggled emotionally, and his friend Eric had difficulties with his ADHD. The students noticed that I was sensitive about bullying and was determined to stop those who bullied, because I experienced it as a child and understand its long-term silencing effects. Recently, I have acquired a more poststructural understanding of learning disabilities and mental health conditions, and now view them as social constructions subject to change. However, dealing with these issues and their potential silencing effects seemed to forge a friendship between these two boys as they learned to grow in confidence, despite the labels imposed upon them by societal structures.

Like John, I sometimes felt, and still feel, like a boat afloat. I struggle with ADHD and a learning disability that cause me to see the world differently and to organize my thoughts and experiences in unique ways. Yet, as a teacher and an academic, I am aware that I am a public figure who must present herself as collected and organized. Although I work very hard and plan ahead to compensate for my struggles with ADHD, I am not naturally organized and, in part due to my intermittent anxiety issues surrounding ADHD and a learning disability, I am shy, especially around new people. Yet my love for students and my love for humanity encourage me to overcome my shyness and to teach, and also to tell my stories. It is love that causes me to face my own struggles with neurological differences and to teach my passions, hopefully while giving voices to others who sometimes feel marginalized and silenced.

Because I am from an educated and middle-class family of the dominant race in the United States, an affluent country, I have been afforded certain privileges that some do not have and have helped me to cope with my disabilities as "pass." However, Samuels (2013) notes that people with hidden disabilities may struggle between passing and occupying society's stereotypes of a person with a disability. In many situations, I have to "pass," for lack of a better world, but as a feminist academic, I feel that discussing these struggles is important, especially for those who do not have the writing voice or the place of privilege to tell their stories.

What I am left to wonder, though, is whose stories are still being left out. Were there students who I did not notice during my public school teaching tenure who needed light to be shed upon their stories who I left out because their experiences did not more closely mirror mine? I intentionally fictionalized the stories and made the students into composite characters, and, of course, changed their names. The stories, then, are representative of more long-term experiences and issues. But I still wonder, on a more conceptual level, which stories are not being told and why, both by reflective practitioners and other writers.

As a White southern woman, I have often been encouraged to go along with the status quo and not to speak out, even when I see incidents that seem unfair and unjust. Through telling composite stories of my teaching, I can give examples of instances in which binaries do not tell the whole stories and in which people deserve better treatment.

Discussion

Although we see identity formation as a fluid, rather than a stable, process, both teachers' and students' identities influence how educators respond to situations that involve silencing. Whether students are silenced because of language barriers, physical struggles, emotional struggles, or cognitive (dis)abilities, we believe that as educators, we can use our own experiences with silencing to foster better relationships with our students. Additionally, we want to continue to question identity labels that contribute to students' feelings of being silenced. Both of us have experienced feeling silenced ourselves, in both childhood and adulthood, so we understand its psychologically harmful effects. Therefore, we believe it is important to question why some students still feel silenced and how we as educators can help them to have a voice.

Certain life experiences, such as major surgery and health concerns, can lead to temporary inabilities to speak on a literal level. However, many of us are silenced throughout life because of (dis)abilities, sexuality, gender, or a combination of different identity politics. Through sharing both personal and pedagogical experiences, we encourage different possibilities for educators and their students in relation to silencing. The approaches of queer theory and critical race feminism provided a way in which to critically examine our stories so as to motivate educators to connect with silenced students. Since both authors are Language and Literacy Education practitioners and scholars, we believe in the power of language and stories in fostering recognition for marginalized students. Through autoethnography and narrative inquiry, we were better able to understand the pedagogical and classroom implications of our stories.

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Freire (1970) noted that, "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of the oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform" (p. 49). The oppressed people, therefore, must first understand the limits that their current situation places upon them, and then take the steps necessary to change this situation. For both authors, writing and telling our stories has been a way to liberate us against the silencing constraints put upon us because of our temporary physical (dis)abilities, anxiety, and places amid gender and/or sexuality binaries, among others. Though we are both of the dominant race in the United States and privileged as a result of being middle class educators, we have been silenced due to other aspects of our identities.

Upon first glance, people may be unaware of our non-binary attributes, but our personal experiences told as stories can open up a dialogue about how to reduce forces that silence groups relegated to the margins. As educators who have been produced through middle class values, we must be cautious so as to not repeat norms that may serve to further marginalize and silence students whose identities are already outside of normative structures. Through writing, analyzing, and publicizing our own stories where we have faced adversity as a result of our non-normative identities, we ask other educators to consider the possibilities of sharing their own stories with students as a way of encouraging more reflective and critical dialogue in the classroom in relation to marginalized identities.

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