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Queering Elementary Education: A Queer Curriculum for 4th Grade

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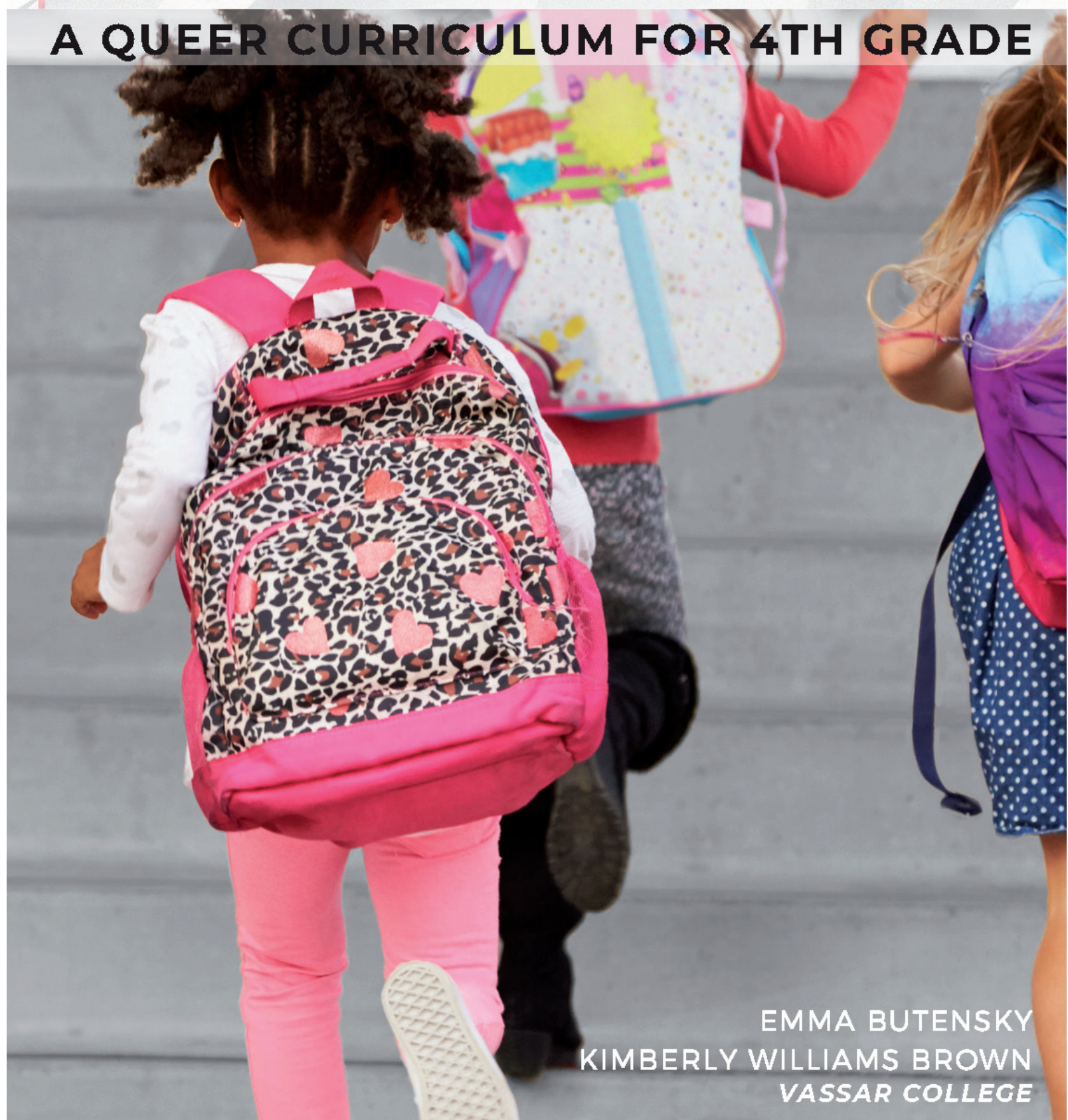
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QUEERING

ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

A QUEER CURRICULUM FOR 4TH GRADE



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ABSTRACT

This project explores the positioning of queer students and queer curriculum in schools with a specific focus on elementary education. Using intersectionality as a guiding framework along with queer theories, educational theories, and feminist theories, this project examines and critiques how queer subjectivities have (not) been included in schools via curriculum for elementary school children. In an effort to better understand how educators have been successfully incorporating queer topics into their classrooms, this study uses qualitative research methods, specifically semi-structured interviews with teachers in New York City. The findings from this study have been used to create a 23-lesson curriculum for 4th grade teachers that investigates bodies, puberty, sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Furthermore, the curriculum uses an intersectional lens to explore how various identities such as race, gender, ability, sexuality, and religion intersect to inform understandings of privilege and discrimination.

Keywords : *queer education, intersectionality, K-5 curriculum, qualitative research, queer subjectivities*

Introduction

As a little girl, I loved school. I loved my teachers; I loved my classmates; I loved math; I loved reading. I especially loved reading. Every night before bed, I would choose a stack of books and my mother would read each one to me. My favorite book was *Leo the Late Bloomer* by Robert Kraus, which was about a lion named Leo who took a little longer than the other animals to do new things. My four-year-old self found a connection to this lion (I, too, was a late bloomer), and my mother read it to me so many times that I came to know the story by heart. As I grew up, I found many more books with characters to whom I could relate. Laura from *Little House on the Prairie*, Gertie from *All of a Kind Family*, Ida from *The Secret School*, and Junie B. Jones all mirrored some of my character traits while helping me envision what my life would have been like in a different time period, or, in the case of Junie B. Jones, if I ever got in trouble (I didn't).

I didn't have to look far beyond children's literature to find more of that sought-after relatability. As a White, middle-class, U.S.-born, English speaking, able-bodied, cisgender girl with married, heterosexual parents, most of the lessons I encountered in school revolved around people like me or were from the perspective of people like me. In contrast to the experiences of many people with less privileged identities, school made me feel included and valued. It was made clear to me, both implicitly and explicitly, that I belonged.

Except for one thing.

I am a lesbian.

And nowhere in my education was I taught about being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or

any other queer¹ identity. Not even in sex education, which I took every year from 4th through 8th grade and then again in 11th, did we talk about what it meant for two people with the same genitalia to have sex or what protection from STIs might be needed.

Many students who are similarly or otherwise marginalized face this issue; they attend school everyday, but aren't seen. Children of color often don't see people like themselves represented in the books they read, the history they learn, or the cultural messages they are fed. Immigrant youth are often tasked with learning a new language while being expected to succeed in a school system that doesn't acknowledge their capabilities. This raises the question, if public schools are supposed to educate all people, then why do their curricula exclude so many identities?

The research presented throughout this paper examines the absence of queer children from curriculum. Because queer children sit at multiple intersections of identity including, but not limited to, immigrant youth, youth of color, and youth with disabilities, this paper will address how educators may be inclusive with their curricula. The theme for this call, "beautiful experiments," captures the unique work of creating a curriculum for elementary students that transgresses the heteronormative, racist, and exclusive curriculum found across the U.S. This paper pushes our understanding of the identities of the students we serve as multifaceted,

1. What does queer mean? While there are many definitions of the term queer and endless identity categories which fall into it, most people think of it as a term for someone who falls along the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) spectrum. However, I will be using the term queer instead of LGBT because it is more inclusive and can refer to identities that are not represented in LGBT. Another way one can define a queer person is someone who is not straight and cisgender.

beautifully imperfect, and intersectional.

My first year teaching gave me the opportunity to witness the exclusion of certain identities from curricula as it was being created. Stepping outside the confines of a liberal arts college into the world of contracts, W-4s, and co-workers was a wake-up call to say the least. I entered my first job post college with grand ideas about how my students should be treated, how gender should be enacted, and how race should be considered in my preschool classroom. Unfortunately, I was met with resistance and outright anger from my co-workers and bosses. Despite their good intentions and mainstream liberalism, their preferred classroom practices reinforced problematic ideas about gender and race. I was admonished for reading *Julian is a Mermaid* by Jessica Love, a Stonewall Book Award winner about a young boy who loves mermaids. I was told not to read the board book *C is for Consent* by Eleanor Morrison, a simple story about a child who attends a party with his family--his parents make sure their relatives ask for the child's consent before hugging him or giving him a kiss on the cheek. One of my bosses was angered when I asked the music teacher to sing, "Hello, kids! Hello, teachers!" instead of "Hello, girls! Hello, boys!" because I didn't want to reinforce a gender binary where it doesn't exist. Perhaps most egregious, when I respectfully pointed out that my co-worker's five senses chart lacked people of color, she told me that it didn't matter because she "did diversity last month."

Experiences like these were frustrating and upsetting, but they have not discouraged me. More than ever, I see how important it is to do the work of making education more inclusive. I've had the pleasure of interviewing teachers who seek to bring social justice into their schools. During our

conversations, I was struck by the enthusiasm and commitment that these educators have for this work. The curriculum I constructed would not have been possible without their support, advice, and experiences to guide me. I hope this paper will further our shared vision for a more inclusive future for education.

The curriculum I created is made up of 23 lessons and was designed for New York City 4th graders. I chose NYC because it is my hometown, and I feel better able to write a curriculum for students living in my own community than for students living elsewhere; however, my hope is that, with the right modifications, educators can adapt it for 4th graders around the country. I chose 4th grade because, as I will demonstrate, there is a dearth of suitable queer resources for elementary school students. Here, I focused on children in later elementary school because I wanted to go in depth into topics which may be too complex for younger students.

Though I am currently studying early childhood education, which does not include 4th grade, the work I did to create this project has given me the knowledge and confidence to tackle topics of identity with even younger children. Since queer topics are often only discussed with middle and high schoolers, if at all, my hope is that, as teachers read my research, they will become emboldened to do this work with preschoolers and elementary school students, too.

Literature Review

This literature review explores the ways in which queer identities have been addressed, or not addressed, in the classroom. More specifically, I consider the question, *What have queer studies for elementary school children looked like so*

far? Using an interdisciplinary approach—a combination of queer theories (Duggan’s (2002) definition of homonormativity), feminist theories (Crenshaw’s (1991) definition of intersectionality), and educational theories—I analyze existing queer curricula and queer-themed books available for children.

Queer Curricula

Feminist legal scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), implores us to consider identities as part of complex matrices—multifaceted and intersectional—that influence who we are. The theory of intersectionality posits that every individual sits at multiple vectors of identity, including gender, sex, sexuality, race, and religion, to name a few. These multiple identities, some of which may hold privilege and some of which may not, intersect to shape one’s experience in the world. Crenshaw (1991) speaks to the intersections of race and gender in police violence against African American women to demonstrate how misleading it can be to only consider one aspect of identity at a time (pp. 1-3). Although Crenshaw’s writing is not about queerness, the theory of intersectionality can and should be applied to all identities because it allows us to see the unique, and often overlooked, experiences of individuals with multiply-marginalized identities. When writing my curriculum, it was vital to put forth an intersectional view of queerness because if not, I would be falsely presenting the queer community as a homogenous group with a shared experience. By utilizing an intersectional framework in the content and development of my curriculum, my goal was to represent queer identities as diverse, complex, and multi-dimensional.

In preparing to create my own curriculum, I

first searched for ones that already existed. I was overwhelmingly disappointed by the results. One resource, The Gay and Lesbian Student Education Network (GLSEN), is a popular site for teachers who want to make their classrooms LGBTQ-inclusive (I use the term LGBTQ here because it is the term used on their website). Educators can find lessons suited to their particular grade-level. While some of the lessons for middle and high schoolers address queer topics explicitly via discussions on LGBTQ history, the ones for elementary schoolers do not. Instead, they teach respect, diversity, and valuing individuality through texts such as *The Boy with the Rainbow Heart* by William Mason and *Chrysanthemum* by Kevin Henkes (neither of which are about LGBTQ identities). Although these are important values to teach, GLSEN’s so-called LGBTQ-inclusive lesson plans are not deep nor intersectional; thus, they cannot do the work of really turning schools into spaces where queerness, with all of its intersections, is welcomed and supported. I knew that my curriculum had to take this work a few steps further.

Despite its mediocre, elementary-level lesson plans, GLSEN provides the public with vital data on the current positioning of LGBTQ youth in schools. In *The 2015 National School Climate Survey by GLSEN*, the statistics show the unfortunate reality that many students who identify as LGBTQ or who don’t conform to gender norms hear the words “gay” and “fag” used negatively, receive physical and verbal harassment, and do not feel safe at school (Kosciw et al., 2015, pp. xvi- xvii). However, students whose schools teach LGBTQ-inclusive curricula are less likely to hear homophobic remarks, miss school, feel unsafe, or feel disconnected from the school community (Kosciw et al., 2015, p. xx).

Bishop and Atlas (2015) have investigated the extent to which LGBT families are being recognized in school curricula. They recruited 116 elementary school psychologists from New York State and asked them to fill out a questionnaire about their curriculum, policies, and practices regarding inclusive education (p. 770-771). In their findings, Bishop and Atlas (2015) reported the following:

Elementary students were taught about . . . gay/lesbian families in only 23.0% of school districts. Only 23.3% of districts used an LGBT-inclusive curriculum (either informal or formal) that gives attention to LGBT students, individuals, and issues. Of those districts, 88.9% reported that they use an informal curriculum (unofficial lessons taught to students) and 11.1% reported that they use a formal curriculum (planned program of objectives, content, and resources offered by the school). (p. 773)

This study demonstrates that New York’s elementary schools are overwhelmingly excluding queer families, people, and history from their curricula. When such topics are being included, they are most often taught through informal discussions rather than carefully planned and prepared lessons. It is important to note that schools in high-income areas were more likely than those in low-income areas to incorporate LGBT lessons and anti-discrimination policies into the school climate (Bishop & Atlas, 2015, p. 779). While not surprising, this is regrettable considering that communities of all socioeconomic levels contain people who are queer, and all students benefit from learning about people with identities different from their own.

The marginalization of students who aren’t cis, straight, middle or upper class, documented,

English-speaking, White, Christian, and/or able-bodied is purposful. All of these types of discrimination and marginalization work together to uphold a singular view of the ideal American student. Teaching a queer curriculum that addresses multiple identities is one step towards disrupting this discriminatory vision.

Queer Literature for Children

Duggan (2002) defines homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption” (p. 179). She describes homonormativity as a gay politics that is complicit in dominant discourses and systems of oppression. Examples can include advocating for same-sex marriage without a critical look at the oppressive institution of marriage (Duggan, 2002, p. 189), seeking the inclusion of queer people in the military without examining the implications of the military itself, or failing to include the voices of trans individuals and people of color. In other words, homonormativity can often look similarly to heteronormativity, just with White, cis, monogamous, financially-secure, gay men as the new standard of normal.

Using Duggan’s (2002) definition of homonormativity, Lester (2014) analyzed 68 queer-themed children’s books for indicators of homonormativity. Through her research, Lester (2014) found that all of these 68 books included homonormative themes, including the problematization of feminine boys (p. 248) and the upholding of the gender binary (p. 251). While these picture books attempted to showcase diversity,

they instead reproduced traditional notions of families as monogamous and centered on children (Lester, 2014, p. 253) while also upholding White supremacist and classist ideals (Lester, 2014, p. 255).

Like Lester (2014), I also analyzed queer-themed children's books to consider how expansive and inclusive these texts were and what messages they conveyed about queerness. Although many of the texts that I explored have been marketed as LGBTQ-friendly, I argue that they instead re-inscribe a homonormative, gender rigid, and non-intersectional framework. While they are friendly towards some queer people, namely those who are otherwise privileged by race and gender, they ultimately perpetuate harmful stereotypes while excluding people with identities that are not "queer dominant."

In *Heather Has Two Mommies*, Lesléa Newman (2016) aims to normalize families with same-sex parents by showing that Heather is just a regular girl with two arms and two legs (an ableist portrayal) who loves to do regular family activities with her parents. When she starts school, Heather wonders if she is the only one without a dad. The book ends with a lesson from her teacher to the class about how all families are different and special. While very radical when it was written, and still considered radical in some areas, this book does not portray queerness outside of a White, cisgender, able-bodied, and homonuclear context (a context in which the nuclear family, even one that involves same-sex parents, is privileged over less common family structures). Furthermore, normalization is not the goal for all queer people or families. I do not seek to belittle the queer families for whom this book is a "beacon" of representation (GLSEN), nor do I disagree with the book's lesson, but like

Lester (2014), I want to push back against the one-dimensional way that queerness is established in literature for young children.

Books like *I Am Jazz* teach children about what it means to be transgender, yet do so by perpetuating gender stereotypes. In *I Am Jazz*, Herthel and Jennings (2014) position the main character, Jazz, as a stereotypical girl in order to justify her girlness once it is revealed that she is trans. Jazz also informs the reader, "I have a girl brain but a boy body. This is called transgender. I was born this way!" (Herthel & Jennings, 2014). Although it can be necessary to provide a definition of "transgender" for children, distinguishing between girl versus boy bodies and brains reinforces the gender binary and positions certain bodies and ways of thinking or being as tied to a particular gender. A common homonormative political tactic is to advocate for queer inclusion by justifying queer identities as being inherent to a person from birth. When Herthel & Jennings (2014) say that Jazz was just "born this way," they are seeking to legitimize her experience by showing that her transness is an immutable characteristic. This implies that if being trans were a choice, then acceptance would not be necessary. Absent is a call for society to transform its views of gender outside of gender stereotypes and the binary.

On the other hand, *They, She, He, Me: Free to Be!* (Gonzalez, 2017) uses beautiful illustrations to show how people of a variety of different appearances can use a variety of different pronouns. This book also comes with an explanation of pronoun usage and seeks to empower children to understand how they feel on the inside. Gonzalez has other queer-affirming books such as *The Gender Wheel: A Story about Bodies and Gender for Every Body* (2017) and *The Gender Now Activity Book* (2011). Most of Gonzalez's literature portrays

children of color, especially Chicax children, using an intersectional approach to affirm children's identities from a diverse set of backgrounds.

As books are one way in which children learn about the world, the types of people and politics represented in them can shape their viewpoints. When children's literature only portrays certain types of people and families, it teaches children that some identities are more important than others. Books like *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *I Am Jazz* are failing to embrace people of color, low-income communities, unapologetically feminine boys and masculine girls, people who challenge the gender binary, and families existing outside of the homonuclear context; this robs readers of an opportunity to learn about queer people in all their heterogeneity. For queer children or children with queer parents/guardians, it can be further marginalizing not to see their intersectional identities represented in current children's literature

Queer Studies in Education

After new policies were enacted in California mandating the curricular inclusion of LGBT people's contributions to history, Donahue (2014) studied the impact of these mandates as they related to lesson plans. In particular, he examined how Harvey Milk was situated as a hero of LGBT history: an uncritical and shallow attempt at inclusion (pp. 36-37). Through his analysis of 11 lessons on Harvey Milk, Donahue (2014) uncovered the ways in which this singular hero's story presented queerness as tragic, White, male, and seeking normalization (p. 39). Not only does such a restricted presentation of queerness exclude the many contributions of queer people of color and queer women, to name a few excluded identities, but it also ignores the realities of homophobia and

heteronormativity as it existed in Milk's day and now. Nevertheless, Donahue (2014) argues that when teachers are handed queer curricula they don't like, they can still use it as an opportunity to develop their students' critical thinking skills, thus transforming the lessons into more suitable learning opportunities (p. 39).

Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016) also have studied the potential for queer-themed curricula to disrupt heteronormativity, particularly through children's literature (pp. 807-808). Like Donahue (2014), they are interested in "queer politics that acknowledges gender and sexual fluidity" (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016, p. 811). Through interviews, Martino and Cumming-Potvin (2016) examined how elementary school teachers in Australia and Ontario incorporated queer-themed lessons into their curricula (p. 812). One participant, Janice, planned her queer-themed lessons as responses to the inevitable questions and homophobic bullying occurring in her classroom each year (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016, p. 816). As a result, this teacher was able to disrupt ideas about colors, toys, and hair as belonging to a certain gender or sexuality through in-class discussions, which then allowed her to incorporate picture books that addressed these topics, too (Martino & Cumming-Potvin, 2016, p. 816). While the issues queer people face extend far beyond the individual comments made by schoolyard bullies into a system built on the subjugation of marginalized communities, it is still vital for teachers to actively challenge homophobic comments and misconceptions, as Janice does daily in her classroom.

The literature in this review has underscored the unfortunate circumstance that, on the few occasions

when queerness is taught in schools, it is often presented through the lens of homonormativity, with the main focus on the normalization of White, cis, middle-class queers. My hope is that one day, queer studies will be seamlessly woven into elementary schools, queer children's books will include queer characters of a variety of different identities, and anti-bullying rules will exist alongside policies for systemic change both within education and outside of it. In the meantime, the curriculum I have written and the work being undertaken by many educators each day is beginning the process of disrupting the heteronormative, homonormative, racist, classist, and otherwise exclusive education system as it exists today.

Methodology

To further investigate the ways in which elementary schools explore topics of identity and social justice, I interviewed seven educators teaching at two private schools and one charter school in New York City. I used ethnographic, qualitative methods to collect data because these were the most effective way for me to analyze the culture and practices behind supporting queerness in education.

Creswell (2002) defines qualitative research as taking place in a "natural setting," involving interactive methods, being adaptable, and relying on personal interpretation (pp. 181-182). He argues that qualitative researchers cannot separate themselves from their work and must acknowledge their positioning and biases. Creswell (2002) urges novice researchers to pinpoint just one strategy. My strategy was ethnographic: a study of the behaviors shared by "an intact cultural group" through observations or personal interviews (p. 14). In this case, the behaviors were the practices around affirming queer identities and the cultural group was

queer-allied educators. This strategy enabled me to gather information from my participants about how to create a curriculum that highlighted and empowered queerness. I drew upon the expertise of these educators to write engaging and informative lessons as well as to learn what barriers, from personal to institutional, might restrict teachers from implementing a queer curriculum. Considering that this study was about praxis, it was most constructive for me to use ethnography.

Positionality

Due to my identities, as listed in the Introduction, I recognize that my analysis is limited by my own ontological positioning. Furthermore, I have previous connections with the schools included in my study; two I attended for school and for camp, and the other was an organization for which I worked. Due to this history, I came into my interviews holding preconceived notions about the schools and people involved, but I evaluated the data using ethnographic methods such as interviews with teachers and observations in schools.

Procedure

My choice of interviewees purposefully only included those whom I knew supported queerness in education. Furthermore, I purposefully only included educators working with elementary school students since it is more rare, and thus of greater interest to me, to find teachers introducing queer topics to this age group. I also asked my participants to refer me to others in their schools. This is called a snowball sample (Schutt, 1996, p. 164). One limitation of picking my interviewees in such a way is that there are many more educators doing this work but from whom I did not have the opportunity to learn. Additionally, none of my interviewees

taught at a traditional public school; thus, I did not learn directly about the experiences of public school teachers who incorporate queer topics into the Common Core curriculum.

The following information reflects what was true at the time of the interview. All the names are pseudonyms.

Interview 1: Ellena Evans self-identified as a White, cisgender, lesbian woman. She was the Campus Manager for a K-5 after school program at Applewood Charter School, serving predominantly Latinx and Black students in East Harlem, New York City.

Interview 2: Shayna Valentin was the Director of Equity and Community at Peachtree, a private preK-12 school in lower Manhattan. She self-identified as a cisgender, Dominican and Puerto Rican, Afro-Latina, lesbian woman.

Interview 3: Jacob Phillips was in his sixth year as the librarian at Juniper: a private preschool-5th grade school in lower Manhattan. He self-identified as a White, gay, transsexual man.

Interview 4: Lysette Fisher was in her second year as the 10s (5th grade) head teacher at Juniper. She self-identified as a cisgender, Dominican and Turkish, straight female.

Interview 5: Dianne Watkins, Klara Peters, and Rachel Robinson were teachers for the 8s/9s (combined 3rd and 4th grade classes) at Juniper. They all self-identified as cisgender, White women, but Dianne and Klara identified as mostly straight while Rachel identified as straight.

I chose to interview educators in the spaces where they worked in order to get a clearer picture of what their work looked like. I chose a semi-structured format and asked my participants questions about their experiences of queerness in their own education as well as how queer studies were enacted in the schools where they were teaching. I audio-recorded all but one interview.

After collecting my data, I used grounded theory to look for themes across my responses (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Although I remained open to new themes and points of interest that arose from the data, I entered the analysis by allowing the questions below to guide me:

- 1) What practices do these educators use to support queerness in education and can I adapt any of their practices for my curriculum?
- 2) What are the challenges associated with implementing a curriculum about queerness?
- 3) What should our intentions be for the role of queerness in education?

These questions also aided me in answering my research question: *What has queer studies for elementary school children looked like so far?* By listening to the experiences of teachers, hearing their struggles, journeys, and goals, I gained further knowledge about how queer studies are being practiced in some schools and where teachers hope to take it.

Considering the small sample size of my study, I was not able to generalize any of the information I gathered to a larger population of teachers or queer-allied teachers. Yet, that was not the point. The knowledge and practices of my interviewees

are grounded in lived experience and have guided me in shaping my curriculum.

I incorporated many suggestions from my interviewees for activities and books to include in my curriculum. For example, I included a trans-centered chapter book called *George* by Alex Gino, which Jacob had recommended. Furthermore, the Human Growth and Development study at Juniper inspired me to include a unit on bodies and puberty at the beginning of my curriculum. One year after completing my project, I asked two of my interviewees, Shayna and Jacob, to review it. This is a form of member checking (Birt et al., 2016), whereby I capitalized upon their expansive knowledge of curriculum development and queer subjects. They read through the 23 lessons I wrote and provided me with feedback about my wording, inclusivity, scope, and sequence. I used their suggestions to increase the clarity and effectiveness of my lessons.

Analysis and Discussion

In order to create my queer curriculum, it was vital for me to synthesize the data I collected from my seven interviewees and reflect on its relation to my work. I categorized the information I learned into the following themes: 1) Social Justice Work: exploring the different approaches these educators use in teaching students about pertinent issues in society, 2) Supporting Individual Students: how educators have supported students who don't conform to gender or sexual norms, 3) Teacher Positionality: how teachers' identities may impact their work with students, 4) Homonormativity and Normalization: what are our goals for queerness in education?

Juniper and Peachtree have vastly different approaches to teaching social justice. Peachtree

has an administrator in charge of developing and executing the social justice curriculum, diversity events, and affinity groups, while Juniper does not. Consequently, Peachtree has a developed social justice curriculum for every grade. The curriculum specifically highlights race, gender, sexuality, and class, and teaches students about the ways in which their identities are privileged or not privileged in different spaces. Juniper, however, takes a more student-led approach. During our interview, Lysette told me that she had asked her 10s what topics they were interested in. Although they had many ideas, the class ended up focusing on the effects of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico. In terms of queer topics, the teachers at Juniper mentioned that these came up organically through the social justice curriculum, books they read in class, and students' questions. More direct approaches occurred during Library class with Jacob and during the Human Growth and Development unit.

After observing and learning about Juniper and Peachtree's social justice work, I was tempted to position one school's approach as superior. Yet, Peachtree's formalized approach worked for Peachtree, and Juniper's student-driven approach worked for Juniper. It's important to note that in both schools, students approached faculty with a request to change gender-specific bathroom signs in order to incorporate more inclusive practices. This speaks to the passion for equity both schools have developed in their students.

Every queer educator I interviewed expressed at least one sentiment in common: each wished to have attended K-12 schools that supported their queer identities, where they could have had openly queer teachers and explicit instruction around queer topics. Ellena and Shayna found a few teachers in high school to whom they could disclose their

identities, but for the most part, they felt isolated and confused. Given their personal experiences feeling marginalized at school, these educators took great lengths to ensure that all of their own students were included.

Not all teachers will be able to relate to their queer students in the same way; however, those who do not identify as queer still have a responsibility to include queer students in their classroom. For example, Lysette recalled having a student who was “unsure of her [gender] identity at the time.” When the class went on overnight trips, “she didn’t like being put in the girls’ cabin; she didn’t like when people addressed the group as ‘ladies’ or anything like that.” In response, Lysette and the other faculty were very conscious about how they addressed gender at school; Lysette read queer-themed books to the students and talked about “honoring individuality.”

Although Lysette did not have to hide her sexual or gender identities in high school, she is committed to validating those of her students. “I’m typically pretty comfortable talking with kids about subjects some people might be a little more scared of, and maybe that’s because I’ve always had to talk about race and being different,” Lysette told me. Many educators teaching my curriculum will not embody all or most of the identities in it; yet, Lysette’s willingness to discuss queerness in the classroom is a great example of how teachers can still speak to identities they do not hold in a respectful and understanding manner. It’s important for all teachers, no matter their backgrounds, to be comfortable when talking about queerness and other identities. Otherwise, as Lysette says, students will pick-up on their teacher’s uneasiness surrounding these conversations and will feel uncomfortable asking questions or having discussions. When teachers

are not comfortable addressing topics like race, gender, or sexuality in the classroom, they are likely to let harmful comments or perceptions go by unaddressed, thus perpetuating the dominant hierarchies and ideologies we are trying to dismantle.

When teaching about queer topics, it’s not only crucial to consider whether the types of resources being used promote a homonormative framework, but it’s also important to consider one’s goals for introducing these conversations to students. I asked six of my seven interviewees how they would ideally like to see queerness treated in school. Ellena said that in her ideal world, queerness would “be normalized.” Klara said queerness would be treated the “same as straightness,” and Dianne and Rachel agreed. Instead of identifying queer people through their queerness, Rachel said she would want to “integrate” them and would tell students, “Here’s your average person, just like we talk about this other average person in this situation.” Dianne added on that the “ideal treatment would be to have it be as normally thought of as straightness,” but to still have resources for queer students who might have to deal with the stigmatization “outside of the bubble of school.” These four educators, Ellena, Klara, Rachel, and Dianne used words like “normal,” “integrate,” and “the same” when speaking about how queerness should be treated in education.

I was surprised by this high percentage of respondents who wished for queerness to become completely normal, a word with ableist connotations, and in this case, homonormative ones. Although some queer people do have assimilationist goals, there are others for whom this is unwanted or impossible. It is also important to consider who can become normal. White, middle or upper-class, able-bodied gays and lesbians are in a much better position to be seen as normal than queers with

multiple marginalized identities. Furthermore, some queer folks' existence is predicated on the fact that their sexual and/or gender expressions are not "normal," and to take that away would be to deny their very beings. Normalization is part of a homonormative tactic to incorporate certain types of queer people into mainstream society without questioning how such a society perpetuates harm. Normalization is erasure.

To be anti-homonormative is to complicate mainstream perceptions of queerness (where they exist) by rejecting the cis, White, monogamous, gay or lesbian parents as the singular portrayal of what it means to be queer. This is difficult to do in schools, which have been White and cis-dominated, family-centered institutions from their inception; furthermore, it is difficult to do the work of complicating an issue when teaching children often involves simplifying. But children can understand more than we give them credit for. They, too, have complex identities, and they can explore the nuances of queerness beyond the fact that Heather has two mommies and Jazz likes dresses.

Not all of my interviewees valued normalization, however. Jacob said he sought queer representation via books, teachers, families, and class discussions; his objective was for queer people to have a more visible presence in schools. Shayna's ideal treatment of queerness would start even before students entered school. She said she would like to see religious institutions, hospitals, parenting courses, etc., teach parents to raise their children to see difference, not challenge it. She wanted to get at the root of the problems facing queer students by transforming the institutions and people who perpetuate homophobia and heteronormativity. Like Jacob, Shayna sought to include differences in children's upbringings, not erase them.

Interviewing these seven educators gave me a deeper understanding of how teachers currently address queerness in the classroom. Not only did I collect data on their experiences and personal views, but I also received advice and suggestions from the teachers who have taught about queer topics. Furthermore, it was helpful to see two very different approaches to social justice curricula: one teacher-driven, and one student-driven. For my curriculum, I decided that a fusion of both approaches would be best: highly composed and specific, but with room for teachers to adapt to the specific interests, needs, and identities of their students. In my curriculum, students are guided through a set series of topics to help them think through constructions of gender and sexuality, but teachers are encouraged to take the curriculum in new directions if students find that they have particular interests in certain topics. Further resources are also provided for teachers.

After incorporating my interviewees' ideas and resources in the initial draft of my curriculum, I reached out to Shayna and Jacob to review it and provide me with feedback. In their responses, Shayna and Jacob supplied me with recommendations for clarifying my writing and making my language more inclusive. Furthermore, Shayna offered an online resource on personal pronouns, and Jacob gave me some practical suggestions about word choice. Jacob also informed me of his personal experience trying to bring a group of children to The LGBT Community Center in NYC, and warned me that it might be difficult to obtain permission for such a field trip as I had planned. I contacted The Center to inquire, and although they do not give tours, they do welcome school groups to visit and look around. However, Jacob's point reminded me that field trips don't always go as intended, and not all schools have the resources or

necessary permission to take outings. As a result, I updated my field trip lesson to include alternative suggestions such as attending a different field trip to the New York Historical Society, designing a class mural, or bringing in a guest speaker.

The Curriculum

The curriculum I wrote is broken into four units: 1) bodies, 2) gender, 3) sexual orientation, and 4) identity, privilege, and discrimination. Teachers are encouraged to break up the lessons further, incorporate their own ideas, and respond to the particular needs and interests of their students. Each lesson includes applicable Common Core Standards, most of which fit under the ELA headings of Writing, Reading Literature, Reading Informational Texts, Speaking and Listening, and Language.

The following paragraphs summarize the main learning goals and outcomes of each unit. To access the full curriculum, click [here](#).

Throughout Unit One, students are prompted to think about bodies outside of the rigid, gendered, and ableist ways in which sexual education is usually taught. Students learn about the changes that bodies undergo during puberty in order to provide them with a baseline for understanding how bodies, gender, and sexuality are related later in the curriculum. The first section of this curriculum also helps build a class community where words that may be considered uncomfortable or funny to some are used in respectful manners. To aid their teaching, teachers read aloud *Sex is a Funny Word* by Cory Silverberg and Fiona Smyth, a queer-inclusive text on sex, bodies, and gender.

During Unit 2, 4th graders begin to make their own personal dictionaries to keep track of the terminology they will be learning such as cisgender,

transgender, non-binary, and agender. Key learning goals include understanding the differences between assigned sex and gender identity, identifying various pronouns, and analyzing the gender binary. Students begin independently reading *George* by Alex Gino, a middle grade novel about a trans girl, and they discuss the text in small groups. Using children's picture books to aid them, the students brainstorm stereotypes associated with gender, race, and other identity categories and discuss how these can affect individuals.

The students begin Unit 3 by examining different types of families. They split up into groups to prepare read alouds for younger grades using picture books that center queer families. As a class, the 4th graders brainstorm ideas and stereotypes associated with the term "gay" and add new definitions to their dictionaries for sexuality labels such as gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, lesbian, and asexual. A key learning goal is to understand the differences and similarities between gender identity and sexual orientation.

In the final unit, students position their understanding of queerness alongside other forms of identity to investigate how these various identity categories intersect to shape one's experience of privilege. By the end of Unit 4, students have examined their own identities and begun thinking about which ones afford them privilege. After discussing the relationship between privilege and discrimination, the 4th graders learn about the differences between interpersonal discrimination and legal discrimination. Groups of students perform skits which showcase examples of legal discrimination on the basis of sexuality and gender, next discussing how these scenarios might change depending on the subjects' other identities like race and class. The main learning outcome for Unit 4

is for students to understand how the concept of intersectionality is related to issues of discrimination and privilege.

As a culminating event, I suggest that families or school personnel are invited into the classroom for presentations, celebrations, and food. The students' work, including their final projects on *George* by Alex Gino, can be displayed alongside class charts and brainstorm. While it is always important for students' hard work to be celebrated, it is especially vital for them to share the knowledge they have gained from this study with their community so that families and school staff are aware of the social learning that has taken place.

Discussion and Implications

Writing a queer curriculum and implementing it are two different things. It's easy for me to envision a progressive school with open-minded administrators, teachers, and families who would welcome a new approach to social justice pedagogy; finding such an environment is a different story. And what about the students attending more traditional schools? Don't they deserve inclusive curricula, too? The unfortunate reality is that public schools in the U.S. are strapped down by Common Core Standards and state-mandated testing, leaving them with little time and resources to implement radical curriculum. It's also no secret that, especially with the current state of politics, there could be immense pushback to any curriculum that recognizes gender and sexuality outside of a heteronormative and cissexist context.

It's important that even teachers in less accepting schools or districts push for pedagogy that acknowledges queer and otherwise marginalized identities. Communities of every race, religion, and socioeconomic level have queer members, and

they deserve recognition. In every community, children need to learn about society's vast diversity, and they will be better prepared to go out into the world if they do. While I hope to teach this curriculum in a variety of different settings, until then I will continue incorporating queer-themed literature, diverse images, and critical discussions into my classroom while advocating for curricula that highlights identities usually relegated to the margins.

As I write about the possible challenges with implementing a queer-inclusive curriculum in a more conservative setting, I want to highlight the importance of not referring to such a curriculum as "controversial." Doing so frames queer people's literal identities, bodies, and beings as inappropriate and as sites for contention. Allowing this marginalizing and harmful discourse to prevent teachers from implementing queer curricula perpetuates this ideology and teaches students that to be queer is to be problematic.

All educators should be conscious of not just the explicit messages they feed their students about gender, sexuality, race, and other identities, but also the implicit ones. Textbooks, literature, curriculum guides, toys, and posters are filled with words and images that communicate ideas about identities and relationships. Similarly, students learn about queerness through the ways in which it is (not) included in curricula. When non-normative genders and sexualities are only mentioned in passing during the sex education unit, students are taught that queerness exists only under the umbrella of sexual health. When these identities are only mentioned during a mini-lesson on LGBTQ history, students are taught that

queerness only matters when it makes a contribution to society. In both cases, children are taught that queerness exists only as an “other” to dominant genders and sexualities. My curriculum, on the other hand, centers these identities by portraying them as significant in their own right.

One day, I hope to see schools across the country seamlessly incorporating social justice curricula that highlight marginalized bodies. One day, I hope that children have access to a wide range of queer-inclusive, anti-homonormative resources. One day, I hope that queer students, students of color, students with disabilities, undocumented students, students learning English, and all other students who aren’t currently represented and valued in our education system find that they belong. Until then, let’s keep working.

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