"How do you spell homosexual?": Naturally Queer Moments in K-12 Classrooms

by
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How students, parents, and administrators regard queer[1] topics in the classroom varies widely depending on the climate of the school community. For the most part though, controversy surrounds mixing queerness and K-12 students. In some classrooms, homosexuality is only mentioned in a disparaging way. In others, it is explicitly omitted. In most, the mere mention of the word will grab students' attention because it has been treated as a taboo subject for so long. But in a few instances, queerness has become a natural part of the curriculum. This study, which is a deeper exploration of data from a larger study, examines moments in K-12 classrooms when queerness becomes a part of the fabric of the curriculum instead of a focal point; in other words, moments when students take no particular notice of it. I do not argue that a teacher's experiences being queer do not shape his or her teaching; in fact, I argue for the opposite stance in my book, *Unmasking Identities: An Exploration of the Lives of Gay and Lesbian Teachers*. Instead, I point to more subtle ways that queerness can become a seamless part of the curriculum, what I term "naturally queer moments" in the classroom, and the transformative power these moments can have.

In 1998, James Collard used the term "post-gay" to describe a life-stage when being queer no longer defines who you are (Signorile, 1999). Vanasco (2002) described what a post-gay world might look like:

> A world where being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered is interesting in the same way that learning that someone is left-handed or a twin is interesting—it is a fact about the individual that affects their worldview, but says nothing about his or her character, interests, or politics. (p. 1)

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The concept of post-gay generated waves of controversy as people who dealt with discrimination felt it rendered their experiences invisible. Vanasco (2002), however, points out that even though there may be "pockets of places" that are post-gay, until discrimination ends, post-gayness cannot be realized. Similarly, in attempting to answer Britzman and Gilbert's (2004) question "What happens when gayness can be conceptualized without homophobia?", Goldstein, Russell, and Daley (2007) argue that educators should "*look beyond* existing curriculum, policies and practices towards the realization of queering moments in schooling that will work towards a different time when gayness might be thought of without homophobia" (p. 197). This article attempts to depict and explore what a specific type of "queering moments," those I term "naturally queer," can look like in the hopes of moving toward a world, not where gayness or queerness does not matter as the term "post-gay" suggests, but where it matters in such a way that it is seen as bringing a playfulness and a way of thinking that turns traditional notions on their head in productive and useful ways.

Although "a time where realities other than social hatred exit" (Goldstein, Russell, and Daley, 2007, p. 197) has not been achieved on a wide scale, on an individual level some scholars describe a stage in queer identity development when queerness no longer operates as a primary identity. Cass (1979) terms this identity synthesis, and Coleman (1982) calls it integration. Similarly, I described an analogous period in queer teacher development, the authentic teacher phase, when queer teachers "demonstrate [their] full range of humanity" (Jackson, 2007, p. 75) and no longer tried to hide their queer identities as they did in the closeted stage I describe, nor did they consciously try to act the opposite of stereotypes as I describe in the "gay poster child" phase. I specify that in using the term "authentic":

> I do not mean to imply that participants were not authentic prior to this phase; indeed, at every moment of their becoming they were authentic by being who they were at that point. Rather, I use the term in the same sense as Cranton (2001), to describe an ongoing self-discovery in teaching that merges the personal and professional. (p. 73)

I also indicate that by using the term "authentic" I do not mean to suggest that each person has one true core identity that emerges, rather that in that phase, they are not bifurcating their identity as those I describe as being in the "closeted" stage did.

I also note parallels with other theories of identity development, namely racial and teacher identity development theories. Helms (1990) uses the term internalization and Atkinson, Morton, and Sue (1979) use the term introspection to mark the time during racial identity development when racial identity ceases to be the primary identity under which someone operates and instead is seen as a part of a larger self. Huberman (1989) uses the phrase "serenity and affective distance" to describe the time when teachers are able to step back from their teaching and

reflect on their practice. In other words, their identity as a teacher is subsumed under larger concerns about student learning. Other scholars have also noted these similarities (Bohan, 1996). Although there are important differences among these identities, parallels among them reveal generalizations about how identities develop. Instead of defining an individual's trajectory, these generalized stages represent an overall collective movement, as regressions, plateaus, jumps, and co-existence occur within individuals. This study suggests that an analogous development may occur within K-12 classrooms. Similarly to how Vanasco (2002) presents a vision of a "post-gay" world, this study aims to present a vision of what is possible in K-12 classrooms.

Several authors have described specific instances of including queerness in the curriculum such as teaching a book with queer themes in English class (Athanases, 1996; Boutillier, 1994; Hammett, 1992; Hoffman, 1993) and discussing the queer rights movement in a social studies class (Blinick, 1994). Other authors describe the impact of teachers coming out at school and tout the positive ramifications such as becoming what Lipkin (1999) terms "native informants" (p. 212) (i.e., resources for queer students, straight students, other educators, parents with queer children, and children with queer parents) (Griffin, 1992; Jennings, 1994; Lipkin, 1999; Martinoble, 1999; Sanders & Burke, 1994; Woog, 1995). In his ground-breaking study, Rofes (1999) surveyed and interviewed his students twenty years after taking his class and found that having an openly queer teacher affected all of them in profound ways. Not only did it make them more receptive to their queer friends, but it also "made them more open . . . to the full range of human diversity" (p. 86). Instead of treating queerness as an add-on to the curriculum, or openly queer teachers as resources or as change agents, this study examines what happens when queerness becomes an unplanned part of the curriculum.

Theoretical Framework

Just as queer theory argues identity is fluid instead of fixed and stable, queer pedagogues make room for "reinvention" (i.e., trying on different identities and ideologies). Morris (2000) explains the importance of this by contrasting it to traditional notions of schooling:

> School . . . demands interruption. American schools want kids to be robots who can spit back the same things on exams (and this is called knowledge?), and score the same numbers on standardized tests (and this is called wisdom?). This would be a tragedy of education. Educators might begin to understand the profound wisdom of queer theory as it asks all of us to reinvent who we are and what we know in creative ways. (p. 20)

It is this "perpetual reinvention" (Talburt, 2000, p. 10) that allows us to "'birth ourselves' and not allow others to birth us" (Doll, 1998, p. 288). Queer theo-

rists promote using education as a tool to challenge binary thinking and explore the complexity of human identity (Luhmann, 1998; Morris, 1998, 2000). Talburt (2000) claims that seeing identity as a process, not as a final destination, places a responsibility on educators "to disrupt the self-evidence of identities" (p. 10). By challenging binary thinking, queer theory aligns itself with hooks' (1994) vision of teaching to transgress: "I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions – a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom" (p. 12). In this way, according to Rodriguez (1998), queer pedagogy "connects particular interests and struggles to a broader democratic project" (p. 181). By doing so, queer educators disrupt social hierarchies and make identity construction transparent.

Queer theorists argue not only that teachers cannot ignore the social milieu in which learning takes place, but that teachers should encourage new "social relations [that are] made possible in the process of learning" (Luhmann, 1998, p. 141). Rofes (2000) describes how queerness can do this by bringing students and teachers together in a conspiratorial moment:

> Did these instances [of having campy gestures and a queeny voice]—moments of authentic pedagogical magic—allow teacher and students to come together to collectively break out of constricted gender roles and, for at least a few minutes, violate patriarchal dicta? (p. 143)

By violating social norms, teachers give room for their students to do so as well. In addition to exposing identity construction, educators can queer the curriculum in other ways. Morris' (1998) describes a "queer curriculum worker" as someone who: "digresses from mainstream 'official' discourse'"; "challenges the status quo by queerly reading texts or queering texts"; "understands that curriculum is gendered, political, historical, racial, classed, and aesthetic"; and "sees herself or himself as a co-learner with students" (p. 284). These classroom practices also match Doll's (1998) description of "undermining the natural" (p. 287) by "presenting the unpresentable" (p. 289), "joshing with arbitrary assumptions" (p. 292), and "countering what is expected" (p. 295). Openly queer teachers engage in queer pedagogy by challenging the "norm" of teachers as heterosexual.

Just as queer theorists problematize identity and identity formation, they make knowledge and knowledge formation problematic as well. Queer theorists do not see knowledge as stable nor teaching as a transmission of knowledge (Luhmann, 1998). Britzman (2000) explains that instead of adults being the ones "who already know and children people who don't know," education should make sure "everyone has continuous opportunities to explore different views of the world, to become ethnographers of the imagination, to research how people make meanings, change their minds, use knowledge, pose problems, and create new opportunities for living life" (p. 49). According to queer theorists, the knowledge and positionalities students bring to the classroom come into play and learning is created in the interactions among teacher, students, and texts.

Luhmann (1998) explains that queer pedagogy is neither content nor teaching practices, but rather a stance from which teachers create learning environments where questioning assumptions performs important work. The goal then is to develop an atmosphere of a "heterotopia" (Foucault, 1973 cited by Sumara & Davis, 1998) or:

> A set of relations where things not usually associated with one another are juxtaposed, allowing language to become more elastic, more able to collect new interpretations and announce new possibilities . . . heterotopias are critically hermeneutic spaces where 'normal' is shown to be a construction and, further, where this construction is rendered available for interrogation. (p. 199)

In doing so, Rodriguez (1998) explains that educators can challenge the "heterosexual matrix," which Butler (1990) defines as "that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized" (p. 151). Queer teaching explores identity formation, interrupts the status quo, and complicates knowledge creation.

Methods

In a larger study, I explored the experiences of gay and lesbian educators. I conducted a series of three individual interviews punctuated by a stimulated recall session and document collection with nine K-12 teachers who self-identified as gay or lesbian. I sought a range of outness on the part of participants, allowing me to examine teachers at various stages of the coming out process. I also sought participants with a range of school experiences and backgrounds. I included teachers with experiences in public and private schools, teachers of different grade levels, teachers of different subject areas, teachers with varying amounts of experience, teachers whose ages ranged from early twenties to mid-sixties, and teachers whose school communities varied in terms of religion, class, and race. I found, not surprisingly, that these contextual factors influenced their comfort levels at school, with teachers at schools with more support and more diversity being more comfortable with their outness and more likely to describe "naturally queer" moments in their teaching (see Jackson, 2006).

For this study, I used phenomenological approaches to analyze the data generated by the larger study, specifically to examine instances where queerness enters the classroom without dominating it. This focus narrowed the participant pool down to the seven who no longer identified as closeted, as those who were not open about their identities expressed fear about introducing queer topics into the curriculum. As Leonard (1994) recommends, I read the data three ways—by participant, by codes, and by life stages—to identify patterns, salience, and lines of inquiry.

In phenomenology, the integrity of the study is determined by its ability to illuminate a deeper understanding of everyday lived experience. In outlining his

guidelines for ascertaining the integrity of a phenomenological study, Van Manen (1990) refers to Buytendijk's phrase "phenomenological nod," or "recognizing [something] as an experience that we have had or could have had" (p. 27). In order to ensure that my study inspired "phenomenological nods," I not only used "intuiting," or "logical insight based on careful consideration of representative examples" (Cohen & Omery, 1994, p. 32), but I also employed member-checking. I gave participants copies of their transcripts between each round of interviews—to check to make sure I captured the essence of what they said but also to inspire further reflection by participants. I also used the focus group as a member check. This gave participants the chance to revise my developing findings to more closely resemble their understandings. Fortunately, participants felt comfortable enough to ask for clarification, correct me when I misinterpreted what they said, and shape the findings. For example, Duncan[2] gave me a note after the focus group that helped clarify my thinking:

> I do worry that your initial question will draw early (and unfair) fire. To ask the impact of 'being gay' on my teaching is dangerous . . . Coming out or being closeted are more precise experiences unique to gays.

I began the final interview by recounting my understanding of the participant's life history. As I did so, each participant amended, clarified, modified, and expanded upon my rendering. Then, the participant and I discussed how his or her experiences corresponded to the overall findings. This helped to establish credibility—findings that resonate with both the researcher and participants (Ray, 1994).

Because I employed "co-constructive" techniques advocated by Charmaz (2000), I was able to create a "validating circle of inquiry" (Van Manen, 1990) by finding shared commonalities from my experiences and the experiences of participants to boil an experience down to its essence. Dreyfuss (1994) states that a researcher knows he or she has expressed the lived experience of participants when they say, "You have put into words what I have always known, but did not have the words to express" (In Benner, 1994, p. xviii). Many of my participants expressed similar sentiments, but Patrick spoke at length to the benefits of this:

> The best part [of the interview process] is that it has helped me to articulate the process that I've gone through as a teacher, as a gay man, and as a gay teacher. It's something that I've never been able to do because I've never thought about doing it. You just feel what you feel and you go on. It's always been a personal struggle. I've never really thought of it in terms of the complete sense of me. For the longest time, it was the physical identity, it was the sexual identity, and I never put those together. I don't think ever before I've been asked to articulate a complete sense of my development as a complete person. So that's been huge.
>
> Second, I think I have never consciously articulated how I affect or impact my class or how I consciously attempt to build in, to plan in structures in my classroom that breed a better sense of tolerance, acceptance, and diversity. It's always

> been working off of instincts. And so I think that's huge. It kind of parallels back to my transition from my first school to my second school. It's like a lot of these things I did, but I just never tried to articulate. If you can't really articulate it, you can't get your hands around it, you can't really plan it, you can't really control it, own it as a tool. And so I feel like I have more tools to use now.

The semi-structured series of interviews produced rich, thick, and deep reflective narratives, as prescribed by Van Manen (1990) in his description of phenomenology. Many participants remarked on the reflective nature of the interview process: "[It] is really interesting, definitely gets you thinking about stuff" (Leigh). Patrick made a similar statement: "That's why I love these conversations because I think about things I never thought about before." Because they got the opportunity to talk at length about themselves and respond to probing questions, a few participants remarked that this felt like "therapy."

Results

Scholarship on queer pedagogy explores ways in which educators can "queer" the curriculum, or teach in ways that call into question what is often taken for granted. Certainly the teaching practices of participants in this study reflected the queer pedagogy queer theorists advocate by calling into question hegemonies that serve to instantiate inequalities (see Jackson, 2009). But this particular study does not examine those moments of rebellion in the classroom, nor those moments when teachers explicitly challenge students' thinking; instead, it explores those non-moments when queerness was hardly even noticed and argues that this comprises queer pedagogy as well.

Participants discussed instances of queerness entering the natural flow of the curriculum without interrupting it, or, as one participant stated, "mak[ing] it part of the mainstream conversation." Several participants described this happening when excluding queerness would create a visible absence, for example, when queerness is pertinent to an author's work; Duncan cited Truman Capote and Willa Cather as two such authors. He also discussed the litmus test he now uses for determining what to include in his curriculum now that he is out:

> I'm less likely to hide an issue now about a character who's gay or an author who's gay. Two of the essays I wrote that I read to class were gay related, so I felt freedom to be honest, not a need to control because [of it] so my monitoring is more, "Why would I not say this thing?'"

Health class also provided numerous instances of homosexuality being included in the curriculum—although this became problematic for teachers who were closeted. A teacher's own comfort set the tone for students' comfort levels with queerness in the classroom.

On the one hand, participants explained that they made sure they did not treat queerness as "a tack on" to the curriculum. Carolyn used the phrase "dating

relationships" instead of separating out same-sex relationships like she did in the past. Lauren made it clear that "There's a lot of stuff in the class that I do that is not, 'Here's the gay unit.' It's simply teaching it as part of the overall curriculum. When I started, I think I actually did do more of that . . . it's getting smaller every year as I make the thing more inclusive." On the other hand, participants made sure they did not bring in queer issues when they were only tangentially related, only when "relevant." Participants devised their own measuring devices for determining when and how to integrate queerness instead of forcing it into the curriculum.

In other ways, participants did bring up queer subjects even when not directly related to the curriculum. By making queerness incidental to the object of study, they sent the message that queerness is not a special topic. Duncan explained how he tries to make it "part of the conversation—not to dispel stereotypes, just making it ok." He explains that this is "not intended to make waves, it's just legitimizing that aspect [of gayness]." One way he does this is by incorporating queerness in his worksheets: "'Jane and Martha adopted a child last month' . . . 'What's the subject? What's the verb? Is it transitive or intransitive? What's the direct object?'" He does this in more subtle ways as well by subverting gender norms: "Tommy failed out of his dance class because he couldn't stand on his toes." Duncan explains, "I'm not saying Tommy is a big homosexual, I'm just saying he took dance." Duncan describes how he had students help him rewrite an essay he wrote about confronting a teacher who made an anti-gay remark to help students improve their own writing:

> I treated it like an essay, not how gayness is. It was like, "Here's my essay. How can I make it better?" So they gave comments: "That sentence when you said this needs to be put there." So it was just like I did before, part of the conversation—not to dispel stereotypes, just making it ok.

This, in turn, encouraged students to take risks in the classroom: "One kid said, 'Well, I'll read mine. Because you had the guts to read yours, I can certainly read mine.'"

Although these teachers described integrating queerness into their curriculum as making it "natural," they did so deliberately:

> I naturally, casually make worksheets that are gay but I'm also very deliberate because it is impossible to be purely casual in the classroom. I knew when I said, "If I were a lesbian, I would be in love with Minerva," as natural as it was, it was calculated. I knew exactly what I was doing even though it was an absolutely spontaneous and natural joke. I knew what it represented. (Duncan)

There are multiple ways in which these participants "naturalized" homosexuality in their classrooms—both as central to the curriculum and as a tool through which the curriculum was delivered—without "normalizing" it or interpreting "the no-

tion of equity . . . as a state of sameness rather than as a state of fairness" (Goldstein, Russell, and Daley, 2007, p. 186)

Paradoxically, sometimes participants had to force the issue in order to get to the point where queerness does not appear forced. For example, Lauren asked her students "to imagine they are straight in an all-gay world—what would it be like?" In a discussion about a character's gender non-conformity, Duncan urged students to get beyond their hesitation to use the term gay:

> I ask them, "What are the expected behaviors or attitudes that our society expects of males? What do we expect of the attitudes and behaviors of females?" And thethird question would be, "What happens when those are exchanged in some way? [When a man takes on a woman's behaviors or a woman takes on a males'?]" They are very reluctant to say what it means, freshmen. And what they'll say is they'll say, "Well, people don't think it's right." Or "People make fun of them." They don't say how people make fun of them. And they don't want to say, with the freshmen, at this point they know I'm gay, and they don't want to say people call them gay. And I have to say, "Go ahead. Tell me what they say. I don't mind. I know what you're going to say but I want to see if you're thinking of the same thing." Somebody will say, "Gay" (in a lower tone). I'm not trying to bully them. I say, "It's ok. Am I right?" And then it's fine.

Summer did this by confronting the controversial nature of discussing homosexuality in class head-on: "If I taught about gays and lesbians, they're afraid you'll become gays and lesbians" and then asked, "Ok, how many of you are gay and lesbian today?" Summer even plays with students' assumptions that her lesbian identity is of primary importance to her. During an activity when students created symbols to represent themselves, Summer asked them what symbol they thought she would include. When students guessed that she would use a pink triangle to symbolize her lesbian identity, she challenged their thinking by saying that she would use the female symbol, because being female is more important to her. By making students' assumptions explicit, these participants were able to create spaces in their classrooms where queerness could naturally flow as part of the classroom conversation instead of being forced.

This intentionality included making sure content, particularly queer content, does not cross the teacher-student boundary and showed a reflection on and respect for the line between pushing the envelope and creating a situation where queerness might prevent learning. Although many participants spoke to this, Glen's extended description of his disappointment in his decision to exclude what could be perceived as queerness exemplifies the attention to the multiple variables that were considered:

> I really like this electric blue and I was really excited about the color and I would absolutely love to paint my fingernails . . . I think the reason I decided against it is because in many respects I try hard not to be a stereotype for my kids. It's really important to me that they know I'm an athlete . . . On the other hand, I want to think, "Dammit. If a person wants to paint his fingernails, he should be able to

> paint his fingernails." Actually my kids aren't that discerning yet. I think it would be very different if they were in high school, then they could recognize that all people come in all shapes, sizes, forms . . . But then again, I'm also really campy in the classroom, too. Like I sing and dance and am goofy and have a number of those stereotypical behaviors, but the nail–painting was too much, which disappointed me a bit actually, thinking I couldn't do that and thinking, "God. If I were a heterosexual married man who wanted to paint my nails I totally would have." But if I were not out, it wouldn't have even been a consideration. I wouldn't have even painted my toenails just in case for some reason I would have to take my shoe off in the middle of the day. The fingernails were disappointing. Maybe eventually I'll get there, but I just didn't think [the students] were there yet.

Just as teachers monitored when to introduce queerness into the classroom, they monitored the appropriateness—based on multiple factors—of it as well.

The integration of queerness in the classroom was epitomized when students did the work. For Duncan, this occurred when a student asked "How do you spell homosexual?" and when students did not react when he mentioned coming out to his Muslim brother even though it was the first time he mentioned his queerness to that class:

> Never once did they say, "Are you gay?" At least one person said in each class, "Are you close to your brother now?" So they just hear it and run with it. And if they didn't know it, they just took it in because it was just a fact of me that I mentioned in a relevant conversation.

For Carolyn, this occurred when students discussed her partner during a class discussion when she used a personal anecdote as an example of addiction:

> "It wasn't just me drinking my coffee. My partner was drinking the coffee, too." Then this other kid goes, "Was your partner addicted?" All of a sudden they were having this whole conversation about my partner and it was just totally normal. It was just so wonderful. And it wasn't like people were worried about saying part-ner or asking me about my partner. It was just like asking Mr. Bridle about his wife. And you have these kinds of experiences and you realize . . . there are probably a vast majority that are ok with it, especially at this juncture.

Carolyn described this incident as "another layer of coming out." For Glen, this occurred when students reacted to his being Jewish, but not to his queerness:

> It's amazing how being out is such a non-issue but other parts of my identity that, in my mind, are less controversial, for lack of a better word, are…. In a tongue and cheek way, I said, "And the likelihood of you knowing who won Survivor is-probably as likely as me becoming the next Pope. And I really doubt the Vatican is ready for a gay Jew." From the back of the room I hear someone incredulously, "I didn't know you were Jewish?" I just couldn't help but laughing. The gay piece absolutely not an issue. [It] was just so interesting to me about how critical it is to be open with pieces of your identity and how your getting it out there on

> your own terms at the very beginning makes it a complete non-issue, at least a non-negative issue based on my experience.

By not reacting to references to being gay or lesbian, the students affirmed for Duncan, Carolyn, and Glen the realization of a naturally queer classroom.

Although these "naturally queer" moments in the classroom may appear effortless, particularly when initiated by students, this belies the amount of effort and courage it took for participants to foster an atmosphere where "natural queerness" can occur, particularly during a time period when queer rights can be so contentious. Participants did not begin their teaching this way, nor did this just automatically occur after they came out to their students. The participants who were able to create moments of natural queerness in their classrooms were the same participants who described feeling "authentic" as described earlier in this article. First, though, they had to come out. This involved several steps—coming out to family, to parents, to fellow teachers, and to administrators. But participants clearly viewed disclosing their gayness to students as the real mark of coming out at school: "I couldn't be even outer if there is such a phrase. So that's been since I came out to the kids, I told them . . . 'This is my last closet. You are my last closet. The door is open. Done'" (Duncan). Coming out to students took different forms for each openly gay participant, but all came out in the context of their curriculum. For example, Carolyn, during a health lesson on homosexuality, asked her students to raise their hands if they knew anyone gay and then told her students "all of your hands should be up because I'm gay." Every year, Glen came out in the context of modeling his "me box," a shoe box decorated with items depicting a person's identities, so as to incorporate coming out naturally into a lesson. Summer "make[s] it known I'm a lesbian in my own way" by having telling bumper stickers in her classroom and rainbow key chains. Lauren explained how incoming seventh graders stumble upon her lesbian identity by simulating a typical conversation of a student asking about pictures of her family:

> With seventh graders who are coming in and don't necessarily know me particularly well, it usually takes a little while before all of them realize that I'm a lesbian and that I don't care if anybody knows about it. I never announce it, [instead, students ask] "Oh, who's that?" "That's my granddaughter." "Oh, where's your husband?" "I don't have a husband. There's my partner right there."

By coming out as part of the classroom context, these teachers set the stage for making queerness part of the curriculum.

Coming out served to bring their queer identities to the forefront, but this led eventually to an integration of their identities. Using terms like, "fullest," "accurate," and "authentic," these teachers saw "humanizing" their teaching as a part of being a good teacher and "integrating all parts of your identity" as a part of that. So even though coming out initially may make a teacher's queer identity primary in the classroom in that moment, it paves the way for that identity to recede into

the background. Duncan's description of being himself in the classroom includes the naturally queer moment of gayness moving out of the center of attention: "It's all about being a person, being myself, and when I am . . . my orientation just falls right down the list of importance. It just drops out of the picture." Coming out to their students and integrating their identities allowed these participants to be themselves in the classroom. Tony describes what this means for him: "By being out, being gay, I am so much more free to not think about my voice. I think I have a faggy voice . . . or my wrist, does it fly too much?" Because "we teach who we are" (Palmer, 1998), participants integrated their gayness into the classroom by incorporating their lives, experiences, and perspectives.

Not only did being out give participants new ways to address homophobia, it prevented anti-gay comments from happening to begin with: "Talking openly about [being gay] diffuses using gay as a weapon. There was no laughter this year." Because queerness was treated as something natural instead of portrayed as negative or shameful, students no longer viewed it as an insult. Glen cited concrete evidence of the impact of his being openly gay on students' language:

> [An eighth grade English teacher] asked the question to her class about if they hear insults around gays and lesbians. She said she had one student who said, "We used to all the time until we had Mr. Clark last year and now no one uses that language anymore."

Being themselves and personalizing the effects of homophobic language allowed openly gay participants to change the culture of their schools.

By engaging in these potentially risky practices that set the stage for "naturally queer" moments in their classrooms, participants "turn[ed] the everyday of school life inside out, upside down, and backwards" (Morris, 1998, p. 285), resulting in changing the culture of their school. These particular participants engaged in queer pedagogy by challenging the "norms" of heterosexuality—by being themselves and by creating classrooms where their controversial self did not dominate. As Carolyn stated: "I think [being out] is a lot more meaningful and powerful a message than any lecture or lesson about homophobia or homosexuality could be."

Conclusion

Even though "naturally queer" classrooms may currently be an illusion, the impact that "naturally queer" moments have on students and teachers is very real. A primary means of doing this for our participants was just by being themselves and presenting a real face to what, for some students, was previously a mythical being:

> A lot of times people who are prejudiced about anything are prejudiced against a stereotype and not a reality. Then, when you have a reality and maybe you

> even like that person or respect that person, then it's like, "Ok, well, all the other gay people. Not Ms. Walls. She's different." It makes people start to question, "Well, maybe the stereotypes aren't so true. Or maybe there's a lot of ways of being gay and the one that I had in my head is an extreme." (Carolyn)

After reading these descriptions of these naturally queer moments, Stalsberg (2009) describes these teachers:

> Even though they are more at peace with their outness, they are always still mindful of their gayness, even at the most spontaneous and humorous interjections and comments about it. It's a mix of naturalism and mindfulness, which is how teachers, in general, perform and teach any topic. At no point, however, do they think that their classroom is past needing mindful-queer and gay topics and representation, they have just lost their fear in talking about it or being out. (p. 1)

Although whole schools or even whole classrooms are not free from the prejudices and scorn of society, these naturally queer moments give us a glimpse into a future time when gayness exists without homophobia.

Based on data from these participants, these moments do make a difference. Students' words and actions testified to the impact of Duncan's outness: "Because you aren't identifiable most of the time and you are gay, you've totally dismantled our conceptions of who would be gay. We have no idea now who's gay" and "You've just changed my freshman year in college. I can't even wait to go and meet people I don't know. The possibilities are totally endless. If you're gay, who knows what anybody else is." Duncan also described how "natural queerness" can be contagious:

> I had this group of kids that I think at the start of the year sort of keep a distance, just kind of quiet because they're not sure what it means. I watch them. I can feel that's probably the issue. Then I watch them watch other kids not give a crap. . . . In time they come around.

Not only did he do this by being himself, he also did it intentionally: "I tell them I hunted and I watch them change their minds about what it means to be gay or to be straight, 'How can you be both a hunter and a gay person?' . . . So that's a deliberate attempt to push that button." Duncan concluded, "I've expanded their definition of what it means to be gay." It is important to note he expanded their notions of what it means to be heterosexual as well. But perhaps the most powerful testimonial to the impact of "natural queerness" also comes from Duncan, when he changed a homophobe into an ally:

> [My colleague] said, "I need to tell you that you've changed me. You've totally changed the way that I look at being gay." He was very serious and very sad. "I was one of the ones who would have called you faggot. I was one of the ones who would have beat you up with a bat. That would have been me. I was full

> of that…. I was I was up until I met you and until I realized, because you're a wonderful teacher, the kids respect you so much, that you were gay." Then, he started crying. He gave me this huge hug, and I was high. I just welled up, even now, thinking about it. And it was very, very sweet. Ever since then, he just loves to ask me questions, [although] he's a little clunky with his gay humor.

Although I term these classroom moments "naturally queer," in a world where queers are still discriminated against, a "naturally queer" classroom still remains an ideal, but the impact of these "naturally queer" moments hold powerful messages of hope.

Notes

1. Throughout this article, the term queer is used as an inclusive term; the terms gay and lesbian are used to indicate how participants in this study identified themselves.

2. All participant names are pseudonyms.

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