Living in the Contradictions: 
LGBTQ Educators and Socially Just Pedagogies

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LGBTQ\textsuperscript{1} Americans and our rights are at the forefront of many current political and social discussions. While the past few years have shown a sharp increase in the number of states that allow same-sex marriage, there are still 1,138 federal protections and rights that many LGBTQ couples are denied.\textsuperscript{2} \textit{Rolling Stone} (2014) brought attention to the crisis of homeless gay teens, many of who were kicked out for religious reasons.\textsuperscript{3} According to a 2015 HRC report, at least 13 transgender women were murdered in 2014 and 12 of the victims were black or Latina.\textsuperscript{4} Although President Obama recently ordered protection from workplace discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation for federal employees or contractors—who make up one-fifth of the American workforce—LGBTQ educators are subject to state and local laws, and thus are not covered (Machado, 2014).

According to GLSEN’s 2013 National School Climate Survey\textsuperscript{5}, less than 1 in 5 students were taught positive representations of LGBT people, history, or events in their classes. Nearly the same amount had been taught negative content. As we fight for national equality, LGBT history is marginalized in the classroom and the lived experiences of LGBT people are rarely reflected in the curriculum. Meanwhile, teachers who identify as LGBT often stay closeted for fear of workplace discrimination, alienation

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{1} Acronym used in this study when referring to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer community in the United States.
  \item \textsuperscript{2} See the HRC website for examples of these rights: http://www.hrc.org/resources/entry/an-overview-of-federal-rights-and-protections-granted-to-married-couples
  \item \textsuperscript{3} http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/the-forsaken-a-rising-number-of-homeless-gay-teens-are-being-cast-out-by-religious-families-20140903
  \item \textsuperscript{4} http://www.hrc.org/blog/entry/with-two-deaths-already-reported-in-2015-hrc-spotlights-violence-against
  \item \textsuperscript{5} The most recent results from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network’s biannual survey can be viewed here: http://www.glsen.org/sites/default/files/NSCS_ExecSumm_2013_DESIGN_FINAL.pdf
\end{itemize}
from coworkers, trouble with parents, or even the possibility of being fired (Machado, 2014). Not all schools have anti-discrimination policies. For LGBT educators who want to engage in social justice practices in the classroom, questioning slurs and designing culturally relevant lessons are only part of the battle—affirming their own and their students’ identities and putting theory into practice is more difficult.

Meanwhile, our socioeconomically stratified neighborhoods, along with an amalgam of structural and societal inequalities, result in “apartheid education”6 in the United States. Segregated inner city schools are six times as likely to serve areas of concentrated poverty than schools with majority white populations, yet counterintuitively, higher standards and expectations are placed on educators and students in these schools (Kozol, 2005). While our country has a preoccupation with order, discipline, and data-driven measures, little attention has been given to increasing intellectual stimulation, academic engagement, and positive identity development for our students—particularly, our most at-risk, marginalized populations. There are many factors that contribute to the stratification of our nation’s schools and youth, and as Dr. Pedro Noguera concludes in City Schools and the American Dream, “It won’t be possible to improve [our schools] until our society is willing to address the issues and problems confronting the children and families in the communities where schools are located” (Noguera, 2003, p. 142).

However, while schools may serve as sites of reproduction, they are also sites of resistance. Furthermore, there are educators who choose to engage in critical pedagogies as a means of countering cultural reproduction in schools and helping marginalized

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students positively develop their identities and agency. Since the early 1990’s, many resources and ideas have been published on liberatory education practices, but in order to understand how this education occurs in schools, research needs to account for some of the most important actors involved in the process—the educators. The micro-processes of resistance, enacted by educators in the classroom, are as vital as larger, systemic movements in our progress towards equity and justice (Asher, 2015).

This study considers intersectionality in the lives and teaching experiences of eight educators who identify as LGBT and/or queer, and who engage in socially just pedagogies with their students. Intersectionality interrogates how various identity markers—race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age—operate not as mutually exclusive entities, but as “reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Hill Collins, 2015, 3.2). Sexuality is often thought of as a less visible marker than others, and most research or publications on LGBT educators has focused on coming out and sharing stories that pertain specifically to sexuality in the classroom. But, for the educators in this study, their lived experiences as LGBT and or/queer individuals inform their socially just pedagogies, views of the classroom and teacher-student interactions.

**Stratification in education**

Sixty years after Brown v Board of Education, our public schools are now two decades into a continual re-segregation process, due in part to the termination of
desegregation plans by the Supreme Court. Among the key findings of the Civil Rights Project’s report assessing our nation’s progress in addressing this troubling reality are that Black and Latino students tend to be in schools with a substantial majority of poor children, while white and Asian students typically attend middle class schools, and that segregation is the most serious in the central cities of the largest metropolitan areas—New York, California, and Illinois. The report emphasizes the fact that desegregation occurs simultaneously across race and poverty as it details the intense impact of segregation on poor students and students of color.

Furthermore, Dr. Pedro Noguera (2008) cites studies by Newmann and Steinberg that show many students are bored, academically unengaged, and deeply alienated in these schools (p. 124). In a 2001 study of ten public schools in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts, Noguera analyzed the ways in which schools attempted to implement popular education reform. His findings showed consistent low expectations of teachers for students, minimal work required, and a heavy focus on disciplinary procedures (p. 126). Scant attention has been given to increasing intellectual stimulation and academic engagement of our students, and particularly, our most at-risk, marginalized populations. In his study, Noguera found that even racially, economically diverse schools have a way of providing affluent students with a quality education, while disproportionately punishing poorer students, leaving them with an education that too often leads to a dead end (p. 127).

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See UCLA’s Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles, founded by Gary Orfield and Christopher Edley, Jr., for more on 2014’s report:
There is a significant cultural gap between teachers and students (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Teachers have long been considered among the key factors in determining student outcomes and success in school, but often for the wrong reasons; a recent study on racial matching of students and teachers implicates teacher expectations and biases in the so-called achievement gap along socioeconomic and racial lines (see Downey and Pribesh, 2004). Today, our teaching force disproportionately consists of young, white, heterosexual, middle-class females who contribute, often unknowingly and reflexively, to the institutionalization of stratification by embodying and enforcing the key social and cultural cues of the dominant group. As such, Standard English is privileged, individual students are pathologized as embodiments of racial and class-based groups unfamiliar to the educator, and marginalized students are expected to obey power without asking questions, expected to acquire knowledge and skills to negotiate their way without an actual say in the process.

In part, this is because the myth of meritocracy allows those who buy into it to attribute deficits to racial groups when students do not make it, rather than looking at structural barriers and ways in which the dominant ideology is perpetuated and enforced institutionally. The grand narratives of United States history are key to this perpetuation, from textbooks reifying racial differences and celebrating supposed victors, to struggles over property as being central to our country’s history, contributing to those who have power (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Like Jonathan Kozol, Ladson-Billings draws explicit and implicit connections between property and education, since property tax influences the resources, staffing, and quality of schools. Furthermore, the curriculum is seen as a form
of intellectual property, with more levels and electives offered at affluent schools, and students placed in tracks based on supposed intellect.

**Liberatory Education: Theories of Change and Resistance**

Education for change is vital in our marginalized schools, which are often subject to hegemonic forms of knowledge, culture and silencing tactics, with ‘discipline’ and tight control utilized as reigning methods. America’s public schools are historically situated, industrialized spaces that reflect the values and cultural capital of the dominant group in design and implementation. Through questioning and understanding, educators and students can stand up to these systems. While counter-hegemonic principles and actions are necessary, teachers must examine their own contexts and roles in relation to dominant forms, too. To strike this delicate balance, the following theories provide guidance for critical educators to help students develop praxis, question reproduction, and positively develop their identities and abilities.

Learning is directly tied to the social, political, and cultural spaces in which it takes place (Nieto, 2010). Many sociocultural factors impact what teachers can accomplish with students, but socially just pedagogies work within the confines of spaces to foster sites of resistance. There are many theories and examples of socially just education practices, some of which are elaborated on below (see Freire, 1968; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1998; Giroux, 1997; Gay, 2002; Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008; Christensen, 2009; Nieto, 2010; Gee, 2012).

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8 Sociocultural refers to culturally situated social practices (Gee, 2012).
In addition to the formal curriculum, the symbolic curriculum and the societal curriculum also operate in schools. The symbolic curriculum (Gay, 1995) includes images, icons, symbols, awards, and other artifacts used to teach students skills, morals, knowledge, and values. Examples include bulletin board displays of literary figures in language arts classrooms or historical figures in social studies classrooms, displayed lists of class rules, and more. Geneva Gay refers to classroom walls as valuable “advertising spaces” from which students learn important lessons.

The knowledge, ideas, and impressions about different groups portrayed in mass media make up what Cortes (1991, 1995, 2000) refers to as the societal curriculum. The media does much more than present factual information or provide entertainment—it is a source from which knowledge is constructed and ideologies are spread. And, most often, the media presents a specific ideology, one that values and idealizes white, middle-class, heteronormative life while marginalizing others and quashing diversity through stereotypical representations of different groups.

**Critical pedagogy**

Critical pedagogues draw on critical and social educational theory, as well as cultural studies, to historically situate schools, contextualizing them as products of the dominant social and political interests in society (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008). They believe that schools must reflect the core purpose of education: as spaces where public citizens can “exercise power over their own lives, and especially over the conditions of knowledge production and acquisition” (Giroux, 1997, p. 218). They speak of the need for educators and students to co-create critical language through dialogue,
engaging in liberatory processes where multiple narratives are valued and students are not objects but active subjects, transforming their lived experiences into knowledge through problem-posing, “naming the word and the world” (Freire, 1968).

_Culturally relevant teaching_

There is an ongoing debate as to whether teaching practices should be standardized nationally, across all populations, and to what extent. While one side creates a polarizing effect, enacting colorblind⁹ policies and attacking culturally specific curricula, there are many theorists who advocate for culturally relevant practices and ongoing efforts by educators to “uncover and reflect on their own biases so as not to act on them unconsciously” (Noguera, 2008, p. 11). By incorporating information related to the history and culture of students into the curriculum, educators help students understand themselves personally and socially, developing their identities.

Culturally relevant teaching is about teaching practice, not about the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 1994). It is an intentional attempt to influence how identities are created within certain social relations that do not support marginalized groups. When educators are aware of positionality, power, and their own backgrounds as well as their students’ backgrounds, meaningful learning _can_ take place. Understanding students’ perceptions of their teachers is key to understanding engagement in language arts classrooms, whether with the material or with regards to identity development. And indeed, “when schools support (African American students’) culture as an integral part of

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⁹ Ladson-Billings (1995) says that teacher attempts at color-blindness mask dysconscious racism—an uncritical habit of mind that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given. We _must_ acknowledge race, and its constructed use of historically denying access to certain groups, stratifying society.
the school experience, students can understand that academic excellence is not the sole province of white middle-class students.” (p. 12) In outlining her vision for culturally relevant teaching practices, Ladson-Billings suggests questioning the objectivity of canonical texts, offering alternatives which fulfill the same standards while introducing students to a broader range and disrupting the hierarchy, and engaging in dialogue as a key aspect of mutual respect and engagement.

With culturally relevant teaching, reading and writing are treated as political acts, given how both have been historically withheld and manipulated, and how they can be used to enslave or emancipate the mind (Christensen, 2009). Literacy has been systematically denied to marginalized groups, and in order to combat this and put a halt to the cycle, we need culturally relevant materials, increased creativity, space to read and write, and social justice curricula. Teaching for “joy and justice” involves creating curricula full of diverse authors and characters that represent students’ backgrounds and provide new ways of looking at the world (Christensen, 2009). The materials, books, and writing assignments we bring into the language arts classroom speak volumes—whose stories are told, whose voices marginalized.

The central theme of these theories is the belief that schools should educate active, thoughtful citizens, by subversive means if necessary. Therefore, it seems essential that the critical educator foster a classroom community based on inquiry: questioning, not memorizing; examining existing conditions, not accepting things as they are; and developing students as researchers of conditions that directly affect them. Critical educators focus on genuine rather than rhetorical democratic goals, providing students with outlets to interact with the world around them to make change, not just
journals to write about how they would change it if they could. These varied forms of
critical education exemplify problem-posing education that focuses on solution-based
dialogue and action, challenging the present order. Critical educators should work to
understand and interrogate social power arrangements, respect the other (and understand
that non-mainstream students have been marked ‘deficient’ simply by not being born
with ‘superior’ characteristics), and engage as public intellectuals and risk-takers.

Educators are in a vital ministry, and by their unique position have the opportunity to
become change agents in pursuit of a genuinely democratic society.

**LGBTQ educators and social justice education**

While the above overview shows the benefits of, and great need for, socially just
pedagogies, the research attempts to explore key questions, such as: What barriers may
impact educators’ abilities to enact liberatory processes? How do educators connect
theory and practice? Can schools truly be sites for radical transformation around
intersecting identities? Will this require fundamental alterations to the way we
conceptualize, organize, and deliver education? And what does it look like for educators
to critically reflect on and challenge their beliefs and categories they utilize in their
practice? And, while social just education is clearly needed, it is not without challenges
of implementation. Educators must be critically self-reflective and capable of reaching
their students beyond simply following the ideas of socially just pedagogies. Could
educators marginalized particularly along lines of sexuality be best equipped to answer
this call?
In order to rid our education system of its role as reproducer of social inequities, we need a paradigm shift and teachers who are not only willing to challenge the status quo, but who have experience in doing so (Rofes, 2005). With regards to sexual orientation, most research that exists focuses on schools with primarily white, economically privileged populations and fails to interrogate how LGBT issues and struggles might look different when they intersect with race and class (Rofes, 2005), even though we know that race is gendered and classed and gender is raced and classed (see Asher, 2015; Chow, 2002; Lorde, 1984). Therefore, in order to address inequities in schools, many of which pertain to race and class, we also need to acknowledge and engage gender and sexuality. Although there has been research and commentary on social justice educators, as well as narratives and some research on LGBTQ educators, not much research exists examining the intersection between these identities.

**Methods and data**

As a research method, interviewing allows for the sharing of stories. Storytelling is a meaning-making process through which people conjure up memories and select details, reflecting on and connecting them as they speak. While “individuals’ consciousness can give access to the most complicated social and educational issues, because social and educational issues are abstractions based on the concrete experience of people,” (Seidman, 2013, pg. 7) educational research is often based in natural and physical sciences. Therefore, the current research was designed to provide the voices of some members of marginalized groups: educators—those on the ground—are rarely included in discussions or decisions regarding education; LGBTQ individuals don’t often
have their stories honored or told in their own voices; critical pedagogues and those engaging in socially just classroom practices are often delegitimized or written off as radicals attempting to politicize the classroom.

The current research was designed as a qualitative study, originally consisting of two semi-structured interviews with each participant. Ultimately, due to time constraints, only one semi-structured interview was conducted with each participant, ranging from 1-2 hours in length. I interviewed eight current and former teachers who self-identified as lesbian, gay, and queer, and who also self-identified as social justice educators. I conducted five of the interviews in person in New York City and the remaining three over Skype from Cape Town, two with participants in New York City and one with a participant in Alabama. Each interview consisted of questions that prompted participants to tell stories and also to critically self-reflect as they considered various aspects of their upbringings, education, and multiple identities. One set of questions related to becoming a teacher, with a focus on pedagogy and purpose: I wanted to learn about people and experiences that shaped participants’ trajectories towards teaching, how they conceived of socially just pedagogies, their goals as educators, and how they connect theory to practice. I also wanted to hear stories about curriculum and lessons developed by participants that demonstrated critical thinking, student-centeredness, and a commitment to challenging the status quo. Another set of questions focused on experiences as educators in relation to gender and/or sexual identity: I wanted to learn about the experiences of being out with students, colleagues, administrators, and as educators in society, as well as related experiences in the participants’ own adolescence.
*Narrative inquiry*

To help understand how my participants’ identities interact in the classroom, my research values their descriptions of personal experiences, which is a key aspect of narrative inquiry (Shelton, 2014). Therefore, I structured interview questions to encourage participants to respond with stories. For example, rather than just asking, “What is your teaching pedagogy?” participants were asked to “Tell me the story of a successful class lesson” that highlighted their pedagogy. This form of questioning allows for detailed descriptions, and helps participants verbalize and reflect on their personal experiences in relation to sociocultural factors (Shelton, 2014).

*Participants*

The sample consisted of eight participants recruited through social media and the snowball effect. A message was sent out that asked individuals who self-identified as both LGBTQ and social justice educators to participate in two interviews about their multiple identities and teaching philosophy. Recruitment mostly took place in the tri-state area, with seven of the eight final participants currently working in New York City and one participant in Birmingham, Alabama.

Although the recruitment message asked for participants along lines of sexual orientation and gender identity—educators who identify as queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender—all eight participants identify as cisgender\(^{10}\): five are cis*women and three are cis*men. The five female participants self-identify as queer in different ways, with one stating that “queer and lesbian [for me] are interchangeable terms” and another

\(^{10}\) A term used to describe people whose gender identity, or self-identification, generally matches the sex that they were assigned at birth.
who said that if she were “sitting in a circle of people who weren’t straight,” she would “probably say queer,” but that it “isn’t a black or white thing.” All three male participants self-identify as gay.

As of the current school year (2014-2015), five of the eight participants are in the high school classroom—two teach social studies, one is a family life and sexuality educator, one teaches language arts, and one teaches art. Of the remaining three, one participant went from high school social studies last school year to district-wide Technology Integration Specialist for the current school year and another left the classroom as a family life and sexuality educator to work on their music career. The final participant taught middle school English and American history, and then moved into the school’s development office at the start of last school year (2013-2014). While they all teach in cities, the schools they have taught in range from traditional public schools to charter, from single-sex to transfer schools and private religious institutions.

Most of the participants are in their early 30’s—the youngest is 27 and the oldest is 41 years old. Five of the participants self-identify as white, one as black, one as South Asian (Afghan) and Muslim, and one as Chinese. All eight participants have grown up in different places in the United States and while they all responded to the same recruitment message, their identities and lived experiences are unique.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Teaching Experience</th>
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<tr>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Nine years, Social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer/Lesbian</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Five years, Art</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Gay</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Four years, English language arts</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>Queer</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Five years, Social studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sexual orientation, gender, and race were self-defined by each participant.
Participant Portraits

In order to honor the lives and stories of the eight participants and to provide context for the findings of this study, I have included brief portraits of each participant below. These portraits are written in the participants’ own words and pieced together from audio transcriptions of our interviews. I chose to focus these portraits on each participant’s background with respect to key factors that influenced their own education—such as where they grew up, what type of school they went to, and family influences—as well as their journey to teaching as a profession and to their current positions. I hope that the reader can appreciate the broad array of voices and experiences present. In the analysis that follows these portraits, I will show how the participants’ varied experiences and identities allow for them to engage in social justice practices in the classroom, affirming their own identities and those of their students while providing an education that is vital for youth in today’s world.

Adrienne

I grew up in D.C. and in urban Maryland and high school was a really formative time for me. My school had nearly 4,000 students, it was about twenty percent white and the majority of the white students were in a magnet program and I wasn’t in it. I just learned a lot about privilege, and talked to my parents about it, too. Me and my brother were the only two white kids in elementary school and we went to a bilingual school because it was a choice my parents made and talked to us about from a young age. So I think I knew, my understanding of my place in the world was very connected to school. I would go from my school where I was just used to being a privileged minority, numerical
minority, and then...my family is relatively class-privileged too. My dad is a housing rights lawyer, my mom was a teacher and now she helps states collect federal data for special ed.

Early on, I felt like it was my role to be some sort of bridge. I took this class my sophomore year with this teacher, an African American woman, who wrote African American lesbian erotica, on the side, and I got to be very close to her and she taught this class my senior year that was the only untracked class in the high school. It was intentionally untracked, it was called American Studies and she handpicked a group of students, and I helped her sort of pick the class, design it, and figure out how to use literature to make relationships across tracks. That was pretty formative.

I knew I wanted to be a teacher, so my first year of college I started taking some classes at the education school at Tufts University. I had an interdisciplinary major that was called American Studies, but it was basically ethnic studies in the Americas, and I focused on something like “critical pedagogies” or “cultures of power,” and I minored in English; Africa and the New World. My thesis was about the ways that state-funded museums, monuments, and memorials talk about a transition to all-race democracy. So, I specifically compared post-Voting Rights US and post-Mandela’s release South Africa. I wanted to look at something that was a bit more tangible than, like, history curriculum, but that’s what I’m interested in.

Then, there was a program that gave a partial or complete scholarship to undergraduate Tufts students who wanted to become teachers. It was founded by one of the earliest critics of Teach for America, so he helped to found this program where you could get traditionally certified if you have a 3.5 GPA. So I went directly into that
traditional MA teaching program after getting my BA. Then, I taught for a year-and-a-half at a comprehensive public high school outside of Boston, moved to New York, and taught for seven years at a small public school in the Bronx. I just came to my current school this year in August.

Angela

I come from a family of teachers. I went to Catholic school and my mom was a public school teacher, so even on my holiday breaks I was always in school. That way of thinking was instilled in me, giving back in that way. My sister and I went to predominantly white schools pretty much all of our lives with the exception of one and a half or two year when my mom was my kindergarten teacher in a pan-African school in what’s now a black, mostly Caribbean neighborhood [in New York.] It was so complimentary to what my parents were doing at home. We had Spanish class and Swahili class. But for the most part, my sister and I’s education experience has been in environments that definitely upheld white supremacy, sometimes unintentionally. But because of that, education, of learning about oneself was so important for my parents. So we would speak about race and we would speak about historical implications. I’ll never forget when I had a project and the teacher gave us a list of inventors, my mom high-tailed it into the school with all this documentation and was like, “How could you give my daughter, or any of these children, a list of inventors and you don’t have one black inventor on the list?” So, I learned very early on, my learning was a very revolutionary act in that I could change the dynamics of power through education.
I had an internship when I was a teenager every summer with Kraft Foods, and I went to college to study marketing, soon discovered that I hated it, and then I started graphic design and I started to be happy. I was doing something creative, I was a creative person. I went to Baruch College, a CUNY, and became part of the leadership squad Team Baruch, worked with a collective of pan-African students of the diaspora to revitalize the African Student Association, I was in the philosophy club, I was in the gay-lesbian club as a straight ally, and then I was involved in the Muslim Student Association because I was also in college when 9/11 happened.

To fast forward to the teacher journey, I ended up going into the music industry because it’s my other family business, so to speak, and I hated every moment of it. I hated it because I wasn’t involved in the exchange of information, I wasn’t teaching and learning and vice versa, I was sitting at my desk typing. And all day, the most racist comments I overheard. I don’t remember what, the straw that broke the camel’s back, but I was like, “I can’t be in this environment. I cannot work in an industry that perpetuates stereotypes about my people, about women,” and I don’t know what possessed me to do it, but I was like, maybe I’ll be an art teacher. That’s when I found the graduate program at NYU. It was the only one I applied to because of its contemporary art and social justice lens, because I was very clear that if I was going to teach art, I didn’t want to teach it the way I was taught in high school. And those things had value, right? Skills, perspective and all…but I was hyperaware because of my journey as a learner myself. I became a teacher because art is a way of having very difficult conversations.

The first three years I taught were at Facing History (NYC), founded by Facing History and Ourselves. I will say that my pedagogy changed a great deal by being
exposed to their curriculum and really thinking about history as a series of choices. It was the most amazing experience I’ve ever had as a teacher, I changed as a person for the better. And then you know, I’m getting older, I need those benefits, and my friend was working at a new school in Brooklyn, but that’s why I left—it was the only reason. So I went from this school that was steeped in social justice to Brooklyn Institute for Liberal Arts where it was very punitive, very traditional, didn’t get who I was, and quite honestly, didn’t get what the students needed. The school definitely had its benefits, like I had never been in a school where being the stupid kid was not cool—by stupid I mean didn’t do their work, because here it was like, “What’s your problem? We’re all trying to get good grades” which I loved, because I love to see brown kids proud about getting good grades. I appreciated that about the culture, but I didn’t appreciate what informed the culture. And now this is my first year at my current school. It’s not perfect, it has its drawbacks, but I really will say it’s a space in which all people—staff, students—feel really safe to be themselves. And I think its because the students come from places in which they were traumatized and not respected for their identities and experiences, and in many cases the teachers came to the school for that very reason. We all came looking for an alternative.

Henry

I wanted to teach since seventh grade. I went to a Waldorf school from K-4 which is very centered on learning through play and joy, so it really inculcates just joy of learning! Right? Kids are excited to be curious and explore. In Waldorf, you keep the same teacher grades 1-8, at least in my school. So the guy that I had was just this
amazing, super nurturing, creative, silly guy who made it very clear that—it sounds trite—but we were all special, right? And he was very good at finding each child’s gifts and bringing them out, which I think is really powerful for a young kid! Then I went to public school and I was very fortunate I had great teachers who were just very good at being silly, and letting me, and other kids too, be really silly in class, but in a way that was productive. I’ve known and seen teachers and students be taught that to be successful you have to be really academic and studious, but that was never a thing for me. I could be a sarcastic smart-ass and still get good grades and learn a lot. My seventh grade humanities teacher was this five-foot tall spitfire Greek lady, and I thought, “You’re the boss, you have fun all day, and you get to read books for a living—I want that job.”

In high school, I just did theater. I was very fortunate, we had a pretty robust drama program so I sang in choir and did lots of musicals and some local theater and I think that actually informs a lot about how I teach, to be honest. We had senior projects as a grad requirement and one component is fall semester you have to do an original research project, MLA formatting, basically college prep research…the spring semester you have to do something you’ve never done before and keep a log in a journal and then present it to boards of community members. I wrote a collection of short fiction, because I took a creative writing course but had never deliberately put together a collection of short stories.

At Brandeis, I double majored in Linguistic Anthropology and English Literature. I was a teaching minor and I dropped it because I wanted to party instead of student teach. In undergrad I interned with the Breakthrough Collaborative all three summers which is a really awesome teaching nonprofit where they target kids in the
middle…they’re the ones most at risk of dropping out of high school. That was my first lead teaching experience and then after college, my first job was with my current charter school. I was an apprentice teacher for a year, and then I started teaching full time the year after. I did sixth grade for one year and the high school where I’ve been for the past three years.

One of my personal struggles has been finding a middle ground, because I either vacillate to being too warm and too nice and too kind of scattered and crazy and excited, and then too strict and angry and mean. I’m slowly finding that balance…and I think one big piece from my mentor teacher during my first summer at Breakthrough was just really instrumental in pointing out, “You love what you’re doing but you’re doing it terribly” and then the last week, it was, “Your class is much more managed, but now you’re a robot”…just making me aware of that tendency. The Brandeis education program is really on the radical, Dewey end of “schools as social change agents and warm places to light fires and blow shit up”…and so all of my work for that program was these wonderful creative units that I look back and think, “This would be such a pain in the ass to execute,” however nicely-intentioned it may have been. But then for grad school, I did the Relay School of Education, which was basically founded by charter schools, and so it’s very Lemov\textsuperscript{11}-heavy, very…bottom-line as to what is the most efficient thing you can do to get kids to grow. Those two things kind of fused, so on one hand, I use a lot of Lemov taxonomy and what not, and on the other, I try to situate it so it still feels organic and connected to the social justice piece that I aim to put in.

\textsuperscript{11} The Taxonomy of Effective Teaching Practices, described in the book Teach Like a Champion (Doug Lemov), is “a collection of instructional techniques gleaned from years of observations of outstanding teachers in some of the highest-performing urban classrooms in the country.”

Malalai

I grew up in a first generation household. My parents are both from Afghanistan and are also Muslim, but they were generally pretty progressive in letting my brother and I do after-school things, sports and dance. I was always expected to do well academically, always expected to go to college and pursue even higher ed. My parents were pushing doctoral programs because it’s very much connected to how immigrants define success: success is often times intrinsically connected to education and also to how much money you make. But, subject wise, my dad was very much supportive when I studied International Relations because we had this global perspective in our household.

I did international relations and women’s studies, gender studies, in undergraduate. I was looking to either be an expository writer around human rights violations going up, or I wanted to go back to Afghanistan around women and gender and health. I ended up getting a part-time job at Planned Parenthood in Education and Training [while studying at SUNY New Paltz] and my position became full-time the day I graduated college. For about five years, I did that. I was a traveling sex educator. I did trainings around sexual health issues at high schools and middle schools, but also at county jails, rehab centers, and other non-traditional classroom settings.

Then I worked for the Empire State Pride Agenda focusing on sexual orientation and gender identity, so best practices for New York State based employers on how to support their LGBT employees. Then, I worked with GLSEN around LGBT anti-bullying and it was then that I knew for sure that I wanted to return to the classroom. It was what was missing, because I was doing one piece of sexuality—sexual orientation—but I wanted to be holistic. It’s why my position with the health institute at my Brooklyn
magnet school is ideal: I could commit to being in one place and building my career while also building my practice internally. I’ve been here for five years, but in terms of classroom teaching, I’ve taught about eight of my eleven years [since college].

For me, teaching, specifically around LGBT—no, sexual health and sexuality at large—[is about] remembering for myself that I didn’t have anyone to talk to about any of those issues. My parents had their teachings which kind of bookended any curiosity, like, “Well, you’re not allowed to date, we’ll pick your husband for you” and that was a hard period at the end of that. But for a young person, that period was really more of an ellipsis and I was like, “Now I want to know more!” but I didn’t know who to turn to, to talk to. I did a lot of research because young people are naturally curious on these topics. So that’s always been the underlying commitment—knowing that I wanted to be that person for a young person or adult so that they could go to somebody without judgment.

Melissa

I grew up Catholic. I went to Catholic school for nine years and my mom was actually a nun for fourteen years before she met my dad, so I was very much influenced by Catholicism. We did have a puberty class in fifth grade, but boys and girls were separate and we were all just terrified, I mean, it was so stigmatized. I will give the teacher credit; she answered all of our questions. Beyond that, in high school, I just got a health class where I don’t remember any sex-ed, just nutrition, diet, and exercise. But I had a suburban education, I was very lucky, the public schools were super nice, and I was definitely a nerdy theater kid. I also sang in the church choir, school choir, and did sports in junior high, but I quit to do theater in high school.
I first started undergrad as a theater major at the University of Illinois, but I dropped out a year-and-a-half in. I wanted to be a musical theater actress and I went to UI because my brother and sister went there and it was close to home. My brother was in New York City and he said, “If you want to do theater, just come to New York!” so I came here but quickly realized that I was not equipped to be in the city with no focus. I wasn’t having fun auditioning and I didn’t know what I was doing, so I applied to undergraduate again. I had started writing my own pieces and plays and was picking up guitar, so I finished my degree at the New School in non-fiction writing and spent the final semester in Amsterdam, which was life-changing.

I got my first public health job in 2005 with an educational theater company called S.T.A.R. and I thought, “Oh, there’s artists working here, actors, writers, musicians…and I get paid, it’s my first salaried job, and it’s right by my house…this is great!”…without realizing it would totally spark this fire of sexual health and public health and teaching. As a kid, I was obsessed with The Real World and Pedro Zamora, the HIV/AIDS educator who passed away in 1994. When I was eighteen, I went to San Francisco with my family and I made them walk all around to find the Real World house. It’s so funny to now know my career and to look back and not have seen it coming. I didn’t see myself teaching at all, it just kind of came in through the job and I ended up loving it.

After working with young people of all ages through the theater program, I applied to Columbia, got into their Master’s in Public Health program, graduated, and about six months later, got my job teaching sex education. I taught there for four years until last year; now I’m working on my music full-time.
Nelson

Personality wise, I really like helping others. My mom is a special education teacher and three of my aunts are teachers, but my mom had the biggest influence seeing her as a teacher growing up. I specifically remember her taking me to work as a child during the 90’s when that was allowed in schools. I remember seeing her teach and interact with her students. I was also raised in a family that took martial arts together at a young age and I became a martial arts instructor at a young age. I was teaching classes by the age of thirteen, which helped to give me the leadership skills and ability to be in front of a group.

I went to a really good high school and had several very high quality teachers, so I think that also gives me an appreciation for the profession. I was an Honors student, in AP classes. It was a huge period of growth for me. I was the president of my class, active in student council, and that participation gave me a lot of experience in learning to work with others, to have active relationships and leadership positions. The fact that I had a positive outlook on high school can help me help kids have a positive outlook now.

I started at University of Maryland for undergraduate in secondary education with a double major in social studies and an emphasis on government. While I was in Maryland, I went to New York City job fairs, and my first job was at a transfer high school in the Bronx for over-age and under-credited kids. After a year-and-a-half, I went to the Harlem Children’s Zone. I had a friend through student teaching in college who worked there and they needed a teacher mid-year, so she called me. I didn’t like it, so I was only there for that second half of the year. As a charter school, it was very businesslike, teachers didn’t work together, and in fact, they competed because pay is
based on performances with bonuses. I was also placed with a senior class mid-year, so it was a difficult transition and I didn’t feel supported there. When I left, I became a substitute teacher until I found a permanent teaching position at my current school. It’s also a transfer high school, but it serves 30% transfer students and 70% newly matriculated students. I’ve taught social studies, global history, US history, government and politics, economics, leadership classes, and I’m in charge of the international program. I’ve also done Yearbook Club, Sports Club and helped coach basketball. I’m also the eleventh grade team leader, so I teach one less period than other teachers and take on administrative tasks. It’s more the social-emotional support, so I check in with kids who are struggling or off-track, plan college trips, create incentives for the eleventh grade, and provide general support.

Howard

I grew up in a small town in Alabama, a couple of small towns in Alabama actually. The first town was Monroeville, the birthplace of Harper Lee. I remember I was in 5th or 6th grade and my cousin told me about this book that was by someone from our town and was about our town and I thought she was lying. So. All public schools, really rural, we moved to a different town for high school so a little bit bigger but even then I think we had about 550 students in grades 9-12. I always liked school, thought it was important. I was pretty good at following instructions, which means I did well in my small schools and small towns, but I always liked learning a lot. I remember the teachers that I responded to the most and sort of wanting to be like them. But when I got to
college, I was a little shocked because I felt like there was so much information and so many things I didn't know and hadn't been exposed to.

I went to Vanderbilt. They have the Peabody School of Education, it's huge, and a lot of my friends went to that. But it never occurred to me to study education, formally, even then. I was always drawn to English and writing and knew that's what I wanted to study. I'm from a really small town where I wasn't taught to think about my future in very careful ways, so even when I got to college, I wasn't thinking about like, "What will I BE when I'm done?" or what kind of job I would have. I majored in English in college and studied writing and communications. Right after I graduated from Vanderbilt in Nashville, Tennessee, I came to Columbia here in New York City and got an MFA in creative writing.

I first knew from a pretty young age that I would be a teacher in some way, I didn't necessarily think too carefully about how. I remember when I was in high school this one girl was chosen to teach French to 3rd and 4th graders at our elementary school and she's French so it makes sense that she was chosen, but I remember being really jealous, and like, "I wanna do that, that would be so cool!" So as soon as I got to college as a freshman I signed up for Junior Achievement. I went to school in Nashville so I went to the Nashville public schools in the middle of nowhere and I taught a business basics course to sixth graders and I remember the first day I was at this school, pretty rural, and they were doing construction and so they had trailers, I walked into a trailer, fifth grade classroom, the teacher says, "Oh you're here for J.A." I said, "Sure?" and she said, "Great, I'll be back in an hour," and she just left. I was alone in a room of thirty ten-year-olds and
I just thought, "This is awesome! I love this!" I wasn't nervous or scared…it was exactly what I wanted to be doing. It was really fun.

I ran a creative writing program at a camp for four years before I became a teacher, called "The Hole in the Wall" camp, founded by Paul Newman to offer a place for kids with cancer and other blood disorders. I ran their creative stuff, we did writing-based projects of all kinds for 6-15 year olds. So I was teaching, in a way, but in a laid-back camp environment. Then, my non-profit friend got a job at a private Jewish reform school as a learning specialist, and she said they were looking for a writing teacher for fifth grade. She got me an interview and I was hired. And that was sixteen years ago. The youngest I’ve taught was fifth grade, but I’ve taught through eighth, and all different subjects.

Alice

I was raised by a single mother. My relationship with my dad is very on the fence. And my mom had five sisters and so my mom and my Mimi were the most central…I don’t think I realized it until late high school, early college: how much I was defined by being raised by so many women. I was in gifted in elementary school, so I always got pulled out of class and so reading and writing and making things became really central to my becoming. I was really bad at math and really bad at standardized testing, but I was off the charts with anything creative—I was that crazy, loud child. My mom was an advocate for me hardcore, and my Mimi was an aide at the school that I went to. But when my mom died and I came to Alabama in eighth grade, I was in advanced eighth grade classes and we were learning what I learned in sixth grade in Nebraska. So high
school was kind of a joke for me, it was super easy, so I was like class president and class clown. I was obsessed with basketball and I was really interested in black culture. A lot of that is definitive to me.

My education was kind of different from my social life. College was just a lot of trying to fit in with my friends—kind of this hippie, white, liberal group—but also not be so torn down by their privilege, because the vast majority of my friends in college were not aware of their white privilege. I have a bachelor of arts in history from the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Originally, I had this bleeding liberal heart and I wanted to move to a city and do organizing. And I knew that I wanted to work with youth. I think, mainly, because I lost my mom at such a young age, so I was super interested in being some type of support system, and I’ve always been really fascinated with race and the lack of equity related to poverty. My specialization in history is in American history—specifically, the Civil Rights movement and things like that, and I knew I wanted to be a person that lived for social justice.

Then, when I graduated, I realized how terribly I was going to be paid if I just worked with a bachelor of arts, so I went back and did the alternative certification program and quickly realized that education made perfect sense for me. I had a couple really good political science professors that opened my brain to what it meant to be liberal and what it meant to be a social justice activist, and then I had a really good college of ed professor that helped me realize that you don’t have to just stand there and lecture. I was super into it, when I graduated I applied only to inner city schools and I interviewed with three, got offered two jobs, and chose my school because it was a district itself so it wasn’t huge—just three schools—and I’ve been there for five years.
Moving from the Midwest to the south and being forced into a very conservative community…when you walk around and you’re white, everyone thinks you’re a Republican. So I was kind of fascinated with the way I would have to live to show people that I did not agree with things they were saying. And maybe the loss of my mom made me want to live a life that was constantly giving back, but there’s this much deeper awareness of the cliché “you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone”…so I think I was much less afraid to choose a career that meant something, that I might not make as much but have a life that means something.

Initial Findings

For the lesbian, gay, and queer educators in this study, engaging in socially just pedagogies seems to be about having a career, and a life, that means something, as Alice remarks in her portrait. Although many themes emerged through the interview and data analysis process, two in particular provide insight into educators who possess the intersecting identities in this study: their personal identities are closely tied to their socially just teaching practices and abilities to build relationships in the classroom, and they are able to leverage these identities and related experiences to act as bridges for students with marginalized identities, navigating different identity markers such as race, class, sexuality, gender, religion, and more with an empathy and understanding based on their own experiences which can lead to positive outcomes for students both academically and personally.

Interestingly, most of the participants were not out in high school—they described their first experiences exploring their sexual and social justice identities in college. This
could have to do with time—while studies in the 1970s showed LGBT people to be coming out in their early twenties, the latest research shows that the average age has dropped to between fourteen and sixteen years old\(^\text{12}\)—or with the sociocultural factors that allow for colleges to be more liberal, open spaces where teacher-student lines are blurred and students are given more space to engage in critical thought and discussion. Although none of them explicitly stated it, this could connect to their desire to provide younger students with socially just, critical education processes.

Also, most participants were very active in extracurricular activities in high school, with all of them citing some combination of arts, sports, and student government as part of their mostly positive schooling experiences. Howard reflected on his high school status as a “stereotypical over-achiever”—he was in debate, the newspaper, vice president of the student council, president of the history club, an officer in honors council, and even his county’s Youth of the Year—as potentially relating directly to the fact that he wasn’t out at the time. He considered that, “if [he] was getting accolades for all those things, maybe [he] could make up for what [he] wasn’t admitting about [himself].” Although none of the other participants made similar statements regarding their active involvement in school, having stayed busy and garnered positive attention rather than considering their sexual identities while in high school could factor into their desire to provide current students with safe space to develop their identities and engage in critical thought, writing, and action at an earlier age than the participants did.

\[^{12}\text{http://www.buzzfeed.com/shannonkeating/coming-out-as-gay-in-elementary-school#sm17O8dr3}\] For more information, see Caitlyn Ryan, Ph.D, and her work with San Francisco State University’s Family Acceptance Project documenting LGBT adolescents over 25 years.
Socially just pedagogies revisited: Teacher perspectives

Multicultural, socially just education must begin with the transformation of the self, not just the other (Asher, 2005). For most of the participants, although they had generally positive high school experiences, it wasn’t until college that they had truly transformative experiences surrounding social justice and sexuality. Malalai discusses how, although she identified as a feminist when she was younger, she began to question patriarchy and cultural pressures in college, identifying as an activist within her queer community once she began to recognize the intersecting ways in which she was marginalized that her white college friends did not experience. Through this experience, she “recognized that so much of [her] resiliency came from things that [she] had been learning all along.” In her classroom, as a sexuality educator, she tries to provide students with the space to engage in this understanding and reflection at a younger age than she experienced it herself.

Other participants discuss professors who opened their minds through teaching style and content presented in and out of the classroom, and in fact, socially just pedagogies tend to look more like what we conceive of as a college education as opposed to the structure of secondary schools, as discussed in earlier sections. Although they used a variety of language and many different examples to discuss socially just education practices, key themes emerged which echo earlier theories of change and resistance in the classroom.

Adrienne discusses the importance of recognizing power by challenging dominant narratives and engaging in conversations and acts that she hesitates to call truly liberatory, but does see as “transformative and aspirational.” She defines pedagogy as a
process, not a “thing you do”—as “a way of interacting with young people and colleagues and modeling relationships that [she] want[s] to exist in the world.” She and others believe that this can be done with any content; that it necessitates teaching critical thinking skills, collaborative leadership, and social-emotional learning. Nelson agrees that it is not just about content, but presentation of material that helps students interrogate power. This is especially essential in working with marginalized populations, and in his subject area, history. He says that many of his students have been “raised with the idea that inequality exists because of skin color, being poor, failing…but history can be used to directly challenge those ideas.” His ideas echo Geneva Gay’s call for culturally responsive caring that is action oriented, demonstrating high expectations to ensure academic success for diverse students and believing genuinely in the potential of all students without ignoring cultural identities (Gay, 2002).

Alice believes that education must be empowering and that educators and other stakeholders need to truly be invested in communities, helping young people be critical problem solvers and activists that “care about everything.” Similarly, Howard discusses the Jewish notion of tikkun olam, repairing the world, and how teaching students to think critically and express themselves is more important than specific content in making positive changes at large. And, Angela incorporates the African idea of Ubuntu—I am because we are—to facilitate community building and critical care.

For some participants, socially just education is described as radical, subversive and anti-establishment, drawing on perceived frustrations of students with the system. Alice mentions intentionally serving students who are most impacted by capitalism, and Malalai uses discussions about supremacy to challenge traditional notions and complicate
understandings. Henry describes how his first unit of each school year is “pretty risqué”—he begins the school year reading *Tweaked: A Crystal Meth Memoir*, in which the straight-identified male author exchanges sex with another man for drugs—claiming that “if it’s great lit and you can do it academically, there’s no reason not to teach it.” Angela wants her students “to be angry [because] the world is fucked up, and it’s using that as a resource to go out into the world and fuck shit up for the better.”

Socially just educators facilitate the creation of collaborative classroom communities—spaces in which students can explore their own identities safely while developing empathy and seeing themselves as part of their classroom community as well as a global community, while coming to see their educators as change agents who walk the walk. This involves extending beyond traditional classrooms walls through social media and technology integration, as well as building and presenting a strong narrative. A few participants have written education-related articles for various national publications, been interviewed for documentaries, created spaces, workshops, and performances in other educational settings and beyond, and engaged thousands in critical conversation over social media. Alice believes strongly in the power of technology “not only as a means of support, but also to engage, enlighten, and energize all 21st century learners and educators alike” so that “all people can become independent, aware, empathetic problems solvers that can not only live, but thrive,” in a world where students can see themselves as the change. She equates community-building as such as character development: “Every lesson ties back to humanity, humility, civility, and right versus wrong.”

Educators extend the walls of the classroom in many different ways. Unlike the other participants, Howard teaches students who are class-privileged, but he uses similar
principles, because liberatory, critical education is necessary for all students in order for societal change to occur. In addition to the notion of tikkun olam, he helps his students recognize their privilege to support equity in the world, running a program where students spend a significant amount of time researching non-profit organizations, discuss how they are battling societal issues and why they are needed, and ultimately, giving away large amounts of money to support the work, acting as young, conscious philanthropists. The funds are compiled from parents, who are asked to give the money that they would spend on bar or bat mitzvah gifts to the school, instead.

Accessibility beyond typical boundaries of students and teachers is an act that challenges power on its own. Socially just educators see themselves, and are seen by students, as mentors, facilitators, parental figures, and even friends. Many educators in the study make themselves accessible before, during, and after school hours, often aided by technology and social media. Melissa believes that, as a sexual health educator, normalizing and answering all questions is key to students developing a liberatory understanding of their sexuality and reproductive processes. She creates social media accounts where students can message her questions that they may not want to ask in class, providing them opportunities to engage with her and form trusting relationships.

The practices and components of socially just education described by the participants connect to earlier discussions of theories of change and resistance in the classroom, and can also be used to describe much of the participants’ own experiences in schools. Although they didn’t put names or theories to their pedagogies or sexual identities until college, they engaged in challenging dominant narratives, real world learning, and critical thought often before they became teachers. The pedagogies
described by the participants make use of the symbolic and societal curricula, in addition to challenging and expanding on the formal curriculum.

**Bridging**

Socially just educators who are also part of the LGBT community act as bridges for students along lines of race, class, sexuality, gender, and more. The educators in this study demonstrated critical reflection of how their understanding of their place in the world is linked to schools, and how they used their multiple identities to engage different students in a variety of ways and affirm marginalized identities.

Adrienne states that she feels being a teacher is part of her identity because she isn’t just being a teacher—she’s being an “out, queer, political, white female teacher.” Adrienne acknowledges her intersecting identities, but implies that they coexist without one dominating the others. Rather than keeping her personal life separate from the classroom as per the status quo, she seems committed to forming sites that resist and undermine institutional oppression for her students. Similarly, Angela reflects, “If anything, my queerness helps me be prepared to have difficult conversations because it’s not an intellectual experience for me, it’s not something I read about, it’s something I experience myself.”

Socially just educators who identify as LGBTQ, like Adrienne and Angela, might be more attuned to pedagogies that are liberatory because they have navigated their own identities in different spaces their whole lives, as demonstrated by their stories, developing empathy and agency through mentors, experiences, and exposure to critical thought and discussion. The self-reflection on intersecting identities, and “double
consciousness” (Du Bois, 1903) necessary for this type of awareness also allows the participants in this study to act as bridges, connecting with students that they may not share significant cultural markers with. Whereas some educators engage in colorblind tactics to try to reach students with different background from their own, the participants in this study recognize the importance of community mentors who can bring critical materials, activities, and discussions to the classroom because they have had to engage in the process for themselves, as well. As hooks (1994) explains, “Engaged pedagogy does not seek simply to empower students…empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks.”

The educators in this study teach in what Mary Louise Pratt (1991) calls the *contact zones*—“social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 34). Within these zones, where sociocultural factors impact the way that intersecting identities meet and interact, the participants in this study actively, purposefully mobilize their experiences and identities regarding their sexual orientation and other factors to make connections and show empathy and understanding of other forms of oppression and marginalization.

Kevin Kumashiro (2000) asserts that “Educators need not only to acknowledge the diversity among their student, but also to embrace these differences and to treat students as raced, gendered, sexualized, and classed individuals” (p. 28). Angela recognizes her intersecting identities and believes that she must use her awareness of them in the classroom to support her students as fully as possible, stating:

As a person of color, you walk around and you carry the legacy and the implications of race, of poverty, every day! Of historical and cultural repression,
you carry that and it’s inherited, right? This trauma that’s inherited makes it imperative…that’s why my parents would tell me to be careful around this teacher or mindful of all these things. You’re very hyper-vigilant and aware of where this is all coming from. I teach very lovingly through a lens of love and care, and I’m now at a school were the experiences are so vast, so some of the students look like me, some don’t, some can identify with me because I’m a wild teacher with purple hair, some because I’m also a New Yorker, some because, you know, I’m thick, and all the different multi layers of who I am.

Angela’s recognition of the many different ways in which students can relate to her helps her to use her lived experiences as texts in the classroom to create a critical classroom community. She, and the other participants, reference bringing their multitudinous selves into the classroom, which is something educators often shy away from. However, this distinction could be because the educator as mentor and facilitator, breaking traditional power dynamics in the classroom, is a central tenet of socially just pedagogies, which are not the norm in most classrooms.

Malalai raises the important point that liberatory education necessitates a diverse community of educators—not the primarily white, young, middle-class female make-up we currently have, stating, “If the source from which we’re getting all these teachers ignores and dismisses the fact that they are generally not from that community, that inherently is not liberatory.” Adrienne also speaks to the importance of teachers who can act as bridges for students when she states that she chose her current school because many teachers have been there for a long time, “and a quarter of them were students there so there’s a culture and a history.” However, although she is not a community member in
that sense, she is still explicit in her reflection on her abilities to engage students because of her own multiple identities. For example, she is aware of what she names her “tomboy privilege”, stating:

I think I get to do things in the world not just because of being a white woman, but specifically because I’m a white masculine-presenting woman who is not especially butch. I can interact with young men in the school and never get accused of flirting, but I can touch them, I can put my hand on their shoulders and redirect them or stand in the middle of a fight and it’s not sexual, so I have a lot of close relationships with young men, especially young men of color that I think is partially related to the position that I occupy that is being queer.

Adrienne and the other participants engage queerness to help with bridging, allowing for “a multiculturalism [which] explicitly affirms diversity, focusing on both the similarities and differences present in schools and society” (Nieto, 2004, in Asher, 2015, p. 66).

Queer theory questions and problematizes how social structures normalize and enforce particular behaviors, such as described earlier on the stratification of our education system (Shelton, 2014). Furthermore, queer theory complicates the idea of static personal identities (Gamson, 2000); the participants in this study make explicit their own intersecting identities, resisting simple definitions and stereotypes, and they refuse to see their students as “empty vessels to fill with knowledge” (Freire, 1970). Queer pedagogy challenges students regardless of their sexual identities as it questions normalized, dominant beliefs and challenges educators to question their own pedagogy (Winans, 2006). While teacher perceptions of students are a key factor in student achievement, most research has focused on the negative impact of this interaction.
However, as the participants in this study demonstrate, teacher perception can be positively impacted by teacher identity when educators are self-reflective and engage in socially just pedagogies, acting as bridges for their students. The participants in this study spoke often of their desire to use their lived experiences to help their students work through their own identity issues, familial concerns, and societal barriers.

Suggestions

Sociocultural impediments to educator efficacy

It is necessary to acknowledge and consider the sociocultural factors that impact educators’ abilities to engage in socially just practices with students. Teacher engagement and comfort level along different lines varied at different schools—most of the participants discussed negative environments at prior schools, which they left for related reasons, and actively sought out schools where their identities would be affirmed and they could engage in socially just work. As demonstrated in the earlier discussion of our current education system, an increase in data collection, testing, and accountability impact educators differently based on location, funding, and other factors. Further studies might examine similar groups of educators with more of a focus on these sociocultural factors, along with structural factors, in order to provide support and guidelines for educators who may want to engage socially just pedagogies but are not in environments that support such actions.
Coming out

Despite engaging in radical pedagogies, many of the teachers struggled with discussing their sexual identities with students. Some used their partners as their coming out, which can serve to normalize LGBT relationships but also feeds into heteronormativity. Meanwhile, other participants were out as a key component of their identity as social justice educators. They saw being out as a political choice—Henry comes out every National Coming Out Day using recent articles about LGBT issues to prompt a critical reading and discussion. He and others see it as part of their accessibility and responsibility, and they consider the various identity markers that they possess, as well as their students’ various identities, when they come out. For example, most of Henry’s students are Caribbean, so he tries to open his class with current voices from marginalized communities as a way of saying, “This is where we are now—let’s back up and figure out how we got here.” To make connections between forms of marginalization with students whose culture might not support homosexuality, he teaches three essays by queer men of color in a class forum, using his own identity as a gay man to create a safe space for discussion and to deepen understanding.

Angela discusses how important having a support structure in Adrienne was in her coming out—they both began at their school this year, and it is the first time both of them are fully out in a school they have taught at. Likewise, a few other participants were not out in the first schools they taught at, but all eight participants are currently out to some degree in their school setting, from Nelson, who is out with select co-workers, to Alice, who is out with co-workers and select students, and others who are out with their whole school.
A negative finding of this study regarding coming out was that most participants were outed by students during their first months in the classroom, and even by co-workers in team meetings. While this could speak to power dynamics, or how students often test new teachers, it is problematic. Another possibility is that this questioning of the participants’ personal lives could be related to the blurred lines that can arise when educators attempt to engage their students in non-traditional ways that students are not used to.

Regarding coming out, further studies are needed to examine the ways in which educators come out or are outed, so that policies can be advocated for to protect LGBTQ educators—at this time, we don’t have federal non-discrimination protections for sexual orientation and gender identity—and to increase understanding of the ways in which sexuality plays into the classroom and school setting. In the struggle for LGBT equality, visibility is key, and educators should be out to the extent that it is safe for them to be. We need better professional development, anti-discrimination laws, and national equality.

Although sexual orientation is different from sexual behavior, negative stereotypes and preoccupations with the sex lives of LGBTQ individuals—as seen by the existence of anti-sodomy laws\textsuperscript{13} and the fact that, while a majority of non-LGBT people support equal marriage protections, one-third of those polled would be uncomfortable attending the wedding of a same-sex couple.\textsuperscript{14} This focus on LGBTQ individuals is inappropriate and needs to be interrogated, because schools cannot be safe spaces for students if they are not safe for the educators who work with them. We also need rich stories told from all

\textsuperscript{13} https://www1.umn.edu/humanrts/edumat/studyguides/sexualorientation.html
\textsuperscript{14} See GLAAD’s 2014 Harris Poll findings measuring attitudes towards LGBT Americans in their report, “Accelerating Acceptance”: http://www.glaad.org/sites/default/files/GLAAD_Accelerating_Acceptance.pdf
educators who identify as LGBTQ, not just those who identify as social justice practitioners.

**Conclusion**

Our schools are already politicized spaces and everyone brings multiple, intersecting, sometimes clashing identities to the space. It is vital that we engage in education for all that has the potential for positive identity formation and conscious action regarding power and marginalization. Too often, socially just education gets explained and implemented on a surface level as multicultural endeavors, instead of as the rich complexities and intersections described by the participants in this study. Malalai discusses how she feels she has to “live in the contradictions”—the contact zones where intersectionality can be brought to light, studied, discussed, and multiple identities affirmed—and that the only reason they are contradictions is “because the lens through which we think success is measured is one that doesn’t fit our lives, identities, and backgrounds.” By living in the contradictions, Malalai references the importance of recognizing and naming the messages received societally, which can be seen in “whitewashed” curricula and school practices contrary to students’ home lives, or not relevant to their lived experiences, and reconciling these forces with “personal desires” and identity development to create bridges which students can cross to deepen understanding of themselves, their realities, and society.

If we recognize the need for deep, fundamental transformation of our schools from sites of reproduction to those of resistance with the power to change society, we need educators who can act as bridges, using their own experiences and identities to
engage in socially just, liberatory education with all students. Our education system already has those with the wisdom, drive, fearlessness, intelligence, empathy, and critical lens to create an equitable, transformative education system in educators, such as the participants in this study. Platforms need to exist, leveraging social media and other spaces, for those on the ground to tell their stories, share best practices, and engage in efforts that lead to equitable education that affirms all identities.

Works Cited


Nieto, Sonia. *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives* (2nd ed.) New York,


