

# Foundational Tenets and Challenges in Conceptualizing a Queer Curriculum Model

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Educational research of a multicultural and anti-oppressive nature continues to focus primarily on gender and/or race, especially from feminist and post-colonial perspectives. However, educators increasingly call for curriculum models that acknowledge intersectional identity (Parsons & Brown, 2001). Administrators and teachers in schools frequently articulate frustration with educational research that does not leave the academy, employs an elite discourse, or lacks creativity, subjectivity, and humanism in favour of dubious notions of hard science and objectivity, captured in the problematic global ‘back-to-basics’ movement. In particular, teachers question the failure of much research to reflect the realities of increasing diversity in their student population and daily lives. I see research as creative and reflective endeavours to better understand culture, and to share those insights with others. In this paper, thus, I inquire subjectively into the indefinable – a queer curriculum model. I use my implicit knowledge and experience as an educator-researcher of fourteen years to formulate ideas on what a queer curriculum model might resemble, so that other educator-researchers in the broad field of education might do the same.

Considering how our lives increasingly interconnect, educators face a pressing challenge. The Civil Rights movement of the United States saw Blacks pitted against Whites, while the early Feminist movement tended to portray men as victimizers and women as victims. Binary constructions polarized identities, at least in broad public and academic discourse, while perhaps giving an illusion of nebulous group solidarity. More recent postmodern and poststructuralist theorizing, on the other hand, challenges dualisms such as those of race and gender. Not all females are oppressed by males. Indeed, some females oppress other females (Ristock, 2002), and some females oppress males. For instance, Nova Scotian teenager Emmet Fralick was tormented by a gang led by a girl until he took his own life (Cox, 2002), and likewise for British Columbian teenager Dawn-Marie Wesley (Girard, 2002). Race and gender are at best cloudy areas, mitigated by other identity markers related to power, such as class, sexual orientation, geographical location, able-bodiedness, and language and culture. Identity is increasingly seen as fluid and unstable, and a queer curriculum model may inspire new lines of educational inquiry.

## *Background on Queer Theory*

Queer theory is an offshoot of poststructuralism. Poststructuralism may be defined as a theoretical school which argues that reality is textually created and interpretable in an infinite number of ways, that there are no universal truths. According to Sawaki (1991), freedom lies in being able to question and re-evaluate our inherited identities and values, and to challenge perceived interpretations of them. Traditional assumptions must be suspended to find new ways of thinking, new ways of life. A queer curriculum model disrupts socially constructed knowledge concerning, for example, patriarchy, homophobia, racism, and classism, which are viewed as ‘natural’ or ‘common sense’. As an educator-researcher, I believe that that counter-hegemonic practices that educators and students can use for praxis are needed to challenge dominant classroom, school, and social practices: this includes the

deconstruction of meaning-making and knowledge which need to be seen as socially constructed and endorsed by those who are privileged. This must start with the academy, which deceptively cloaks itself in false scientific objectivity that obscures oppression and expression. There must be an acknowledgement and embracing of subjectivity in qualitative research, and a diligent questioning of power that will trouble many. In résumé, queer theory attempts the following: to trouble common-sense understandings of what is considered normal; to disrupt heterosexualised discourse and practice, asking who and what is silenced and why; to examine the interplays of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, geographical location, and language and culture, through the lens of sexuality. Using these premises of queer theory, I propose the following foundational tenets of a queer curriculum model for educational inquiry.

### *Tenets of a Queer Curriculum Model<sup>10</sup>*

These tenets for development of a queer curriculum model may be used in revisionist reading and the teachings of texts,<sup>11</sup> including in elementary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions. In keeping with queer theory, these tenets are not meant to represent definitive answers, solutions, or strategies for educators. Rather, freedom lies in the potential to ask questions and to re-evaluate social customs, beliefs, and knowledge.

#### 1) Asking Questions & Creating Dialogue

We must acknowledge a startling premise if we are to engage in a queer curriculum model - as texts and meanings are deconstructed, there are often fewer answers than questions. Some students and, indeed, educators, will find this troubling. Our school systems frequently fall short of encouraging divergent thinking. With the current global trend of back-to-basics and standardized testing, this phenomenon may worsen. Establishing recognition, let alone inclusive programs, for people often left on the margins of marginality, is not without its struggles. Although the professional literature on survivors of sexual assault has increased over the past twenty-five years, it has remained predominantly focused on female victims. The sexual assault of adult males is rarely reported in the identified literature, and the notion of men as victims rather than the perpetrators of sexual assaults is relatively new (Stermac & Bove, 2004). In Toronto, Ontario, Canada, for instance, the numbers of males, whether teenage fathers or adult survivors of sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, seeking help in social services venues originally intended for women, has left many social workers perplexed. While some social workers have responded with concern and help, others have responded with suspicion and distrust (Finlay & Keewatin, 2002; Gosse

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<sup>10</sup> I am inspired by many reading, including: Kumanshiro's (2001) theories of antiracist and anti-heterosexist education, Britzman's (1995) concepts of queer pedagogy; Lipkin's (1999) ideas of curriculum as change agent, Nelson's (1999) queer pedagogies of inquiry, notions of diversity in multicultural education (Grauerholz, 2001; Hawkes, 2003), and concepts of cultural and linguistic capital (Dei, 1993; Heller, 2002).

<sup>11</sup> 'Texts' are defined as any representation, whether visual, written, auditory, etc., that conveys meaning, thus transcending the usual meaning of a written document. Therefore, in schools, a song, short story, painting, graffiti, school play, dance, morning announcements, school assemblies, the physical environment of the classroom or halls, social interactions of various sorts, etc., may all be considered texts.

& Gearson, 2002). Academic and popular discourse over the past few decades is replete with knowledge of the plight of girls in schools. While not denying the real needs of female students, males need remedial help more often, and have higher rates of dropping out of school, not attending university, suicide, and becoming entangled in the legal system (Tiger, 1999). A disquieting and uncommon picture emerges - one of the marginality of males. A queer curriculum model strives to inquire into these areas of male studies with analysis of racial inequality, geographic location, and socio-economic status. New insights into the lived experiences of Black and Native men are potentially great. While recent research has begun to focus much more on the learning, social outcomes, and schooling experiences of boys (Weaver-Hightower, 2003), queer educator-researchers must strenuously consider intersecting race, class, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, geographical location, and language and culture, through the lens of sexuality, so that a broader understanding may result, and binaries such as male-female be challenged. The task of a queer curriculum model is to ask questions that may trouble many, and contest knowledge accepted as truth or common sense, such as recognizing that males may be marginalized in multiple ways.

A queer curriculum model may be likened to holistic education as an approach that consciously tries to promote student learning and growth beyond cognitive levels. A queer curriculum model incorporates anti-oppressive pedagogies. Considering the multiplicity of human beings and incorporating spiritual, physical, moral, intellectual, and emotional factors should persist. Rigorous questioning and dialoguing can help students to relate course material to their own lives, thereby helping them to interrogate their own values and responsibilities. For instance, students may question the male dominated pedagogies of a history class, or the emphasis on macro-historical events such as the Great Depression in lieu of personal, micro-histories of women, Native people, historical queers, or rural Newfoundlanders in a Canadian context (Gosse, 2003a). Students may deconstruct fairy tales or canonical literature through the matrix of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, geographical location, and language and culture, using the lens of sexuality. Events such as 'Bring Your Daughter to Work', or separate gym classes, line-ups, and lockers for so-called males and females may be challenged for the sort of gender apartheid they propagate (Gosse, 2004b). Societal beliefs in objective scientific facts, free of bias, may be suspended, so that queer inquiry may take their place, and new knowledge and ways of knowing encouraged. Science and math may see infusions of narrative, poetry, voice, and subjectivity long overdue, as foreseen by Freud (Freud, 1910/1959) decades ago, thereby queering the curriculum. Storytelling, including that of an autobiographical and fictional nature, may be used as an imaginative and powerful means to share our stories as queers, and provoke questioning and dialogues (Gosse, 2003b). Such work has theoretical and transformative potential. The representation of a story or stories has potential to provide insights into the human condition, and for the development of new theoretical or practical approaches to qualitative inquiry (Cole & Knowles, 2001). As educator-researchers, we must shift from the comfort of traditional methods and embrace new and disruptive methods of educational enquiry that a queer curriculum model embodies.

Queerness as an ideology should take place across the curriculum and be prevalent in discussions throughout the day, every day. Queer theory must be a cross-curricular effort integrated through queerly reading texts in literature, music, history, science, math, etc. Queering the curriculum in ways relevant to students is paramount, but optimally this should not take the form of special units or lessons. When students

are pulled from class to attend a workshop on anti-homophobia or racism, for example, many tend not to take the work seriously, or to see it as part of the real curriculum (Gosse, 2004a). Hansen (1992) reports that human disasters cause people to unite and examine priorities, but the effect is usually temporary as the spirit of community or outrage grows thin and people return to business as usual. Special lessons or units have a similar, cursory effect. Queerorizing<sup>12</sup> can become a focal part of teacher training programs and in-servicing for existing educators and administrators. Drawing from race and gender equity programs and pedagogies, a queer curriculum model should be presented as their evolutionary descendant, and inclusive of all people, regardless of their sexual orientation.

## 2) Education and Space for All

A queer curriculum model must strive to provide education and safe space for all, but this will be challenging. Gay/Straight Alliances have multiplied across North America (Bott, 2000; Woog, 2000). Several schools in the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) have them. The TDSB also has a Triangle Program that operates as a transitional school for students who are queer, with the premise that they should eventually be reintegrated into a regular public school. Many of the students in the Triangle Program were bullied by peers, some quite violently. Administrative and political problems abound, however. Threats of cutbacks have plagued the program. Vanessa Russell, former instructional leader of the Triangle Program, says teachers in her board cannot opt out of anti-homophobic training; moreover, the Equity Department of the TDSB used to have eight staff but now have five in an amalgamated board six times the size it used to be (Costello, 2002). Rather than implementing a program that removes students from mainstream education, Snider (1996) suggests schools must make fundamental changes to eliminate racism and homophobia within the dominant educational structure. This would be a move towards a queerer education and space.<sup>13</sup>

I suggest the formation of Queer Alliances in schools, which may lead the way in queering the curriculum along the lines of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, geographical location, and language and culture, through the lens of sexuality. A Queer Alliance may be formed of educators, students, staff, family, and community members, who serve as leaders in queering the curriculum. I suggest the following guidelines in the formation of Queer Alliances:

- Read and share educational research about queers, including (auto)biographies such as *Gorilla Suit, My Adventures in Bodybuilding* (Paris, 1997) and gay themed novels such as *Bad Boy* (Wieler, 1989), or *No Signature* (Bell, 1992). Also read and share queer-themed educational novels such as *Boundary Bay: A Novel As Educational Research* (Dunlop, 1999) or *Jackytar, an inquiry into*

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<sup>12</sup> Queer may be used as an umbrella term for people who do not identify as heterosexual or heteronormative, but in a queer curriculum model, queer is a verb, meaning to queerly read and theorize, or queerorize.

<sup>13</sup> However, having volunteered with the Triangle Program in 1999 as a tutor, I believe that alternative schools such as this must exist until such a time when all students are safe in regular schools. The levels of physical and symbolic violence (silencing, name calling, exclusion) affecting queer students are currently so insidious, virulent, and widespread, their emotional well-being and even their lives are at risk daily. Alternatives, such as the Triangle Program, help keep these students safer. Some students have actually graduated from the Triangle Program in Toronto, although this was not the original intent.

*identity and the creative research process* (Gosse, in progress). Queer your reading of these texts;

- Check with your union about potential legal support so that you know exactly what sorts of policies and support exist;
- Contact potentially supportive staff for support and ask staff members with tenure to mediate conflicts with administration;
- Include students who are involved in anti-racist groups;
- Plan to meet as often as twice a month, one afternoon after school for students, once in the evening for an educational evening program for students, staff, parents, and other community members;
- Advertise using posters and on-line; establishing an 'anti-defacement of posters' policy in the school will be helpful;
- Set up a website for the group or an on-line newspaper or magazine with editorials; an on-line website will also help other schools communicate with you;
- Define the group as inclusive of anyone willing to engage in anti-oppressive education to challenge racism, classism, homophobia, body fascism, regionalism, and sexism;
- Get help from queer organizations, such as PFLAG, the local queer community centre, SSAFE (Safe Schools are For Everyone), local queer celebrities, and the school board's equity or non-violence staff;
- Have an actual safe space in the school for students to congregate, not only for meetings, but anytime. Too often, harassed students flock to libraries, computer labs, and music rooms for safety where their presence may be unwelcome, and their actual reasons for being there unacknowledged.

### 3) Discourse and Symbolic Violence

Discourse is power. Wessler (2000/2001) discusses dangerous weapons brought to school daily - degrading words and putdowns directed at students' gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, economic status, and physical and mental abilities. He further theorizes that degrading words and name-calling occur at the beginning of harassment, and then escalate, creating a path for fear, rage, and, finally, loss of spirit. Newspapers are rife with stories of youth who are bullied, sometimes to the point of suicide, retaliation, or legal proceedings. The most famous and tragic of these is perhaps Columbine, Colorado (Kalinowski, 2002), but serious incidents occur internationally and locally. All serve grimly to inform us that our education systems continue to reproduce binary social divisions so that groups defined as in-crowd/nerds, White/Black students, or gays/straights are caught in a puerile hierarchy (Botstein, 1997), with many sufferers. All students, regardless of sexual orientation, may fall victim to name-calling (Matas, 2002). However, males may be particularly subjected to homophobic taunts. Calling a boy a girl may be seen as the ultimate insult (Mac an Ghail, 2000), for we live in cultures where many males are encouraged to cling to outdated, hypermasculine traits. Moreover, when name calling is homophobic, teachers and school librarians confront the issue only 3% of the time (Bott, 2000). In Canada, students in elementary and junior high schools often use the word 'gay' to denote something as 'stupid', 'funny', or 'boring'. Therefore, being queer becomes something to be mocked, disdained, or punished. We need to educate children about such heterosexist practices and teach them to monitor their own behaviours and that of peers. Likewise, racist and sexist language must be challenged.

A 'Language and Violence Policy' must become a consistent school effort with students, teachers, administrators, families, and community involved.

Symbolic violence may be defined as the power of the dominant group to constitute and justify domination by imposing what is good or legitimate in society, thereby marginalizing those who do not share these values and access to resources. The dominant heterosexual group uses symbolic violence in education, work relations, social organizations, even in concepts of good taste and beauty. Those who share dominant linguistic and cultural norms, including Standard English and middle-class tastes in clothing, music, entertainment, and so forth, are privileged. Those who do not share these dominant linguistic and cultural norms suffer from linguistic and cultural violence; their accent or dialect, and tastes in clothing, music, entertainment, and so forth, may be under-valued and even reviled by the dominant group. In the light of a queer curriculum, hegemonic linguistic and cultural capital maintain status quo assumptions and ways of doing things, which become seen as normal and common sense. Indeed, homophobia, heterosexism, and dominant Anglophone cultural norms are reinforced in schools in two major ways (Herr, 1997). Firstly, with exclusion, there is a lack of positive images of queer role models, and messages, rendering marginalized people invisible. Secondly, with inclusion, when queer issues and discussion arise, they are portrayed in a negative light, pathologised or made dangerous, thereby reinstating symbolic violence. By virtue of not including diverse portrayals of queers in the curriculum inside the school or in other social venues (except pathologically), or in the form of special units or lessons, a heteronormative Anglophone elite dominates and inflicts symbolic violence on non-conformists. In our classes, we need to explore how students may be othered linguistically, culturally, and materially, thus preventing or impeding them from accessing power, material, and prestige.

For instance, Heller & Martin-Jones (1997) discuss how teacher talk, taking turns, and an emphasis on 'respect' benefit institutional language norms of a monolingual-type French in French schools in Ontario, Canada. These norms are viewed as necessary for the maintenance of French as a minority language, favouring the middle class, whereas bilingual and vernacular forms, often used by working class students and the large percentage of students from Africa and the Caribbean, are not approved. Similarly, research indicates that linguistic and cultural minorities who are also sexual minorities encounter increased physical and symbolic violence, including symbolic domination (Gosse, Labrie, Grimard, & Roberge, 2000; Labrie & Gosse, 2003). Symbolic violence may take the following forms: silence and silencing, fear, threat of physical violence, homophobic and sexist name-calling, linguistic intimidation (when a dominant form of standard language occludes usage of a socially marginalized form), social policing of public behaviour (such as holding hands or kissing), social status intimidation (when a more prestigious member of society uses social stature to oppress a less prestigious member, as in dominating conversation input, or inhibiting contribution of opinions), family/community trauma or estrangement (such as when families or communities ignore difference, or overtly shun Others, often culminating in the Other moving away). Symbolic domination is the ability of dominant groups to convince themselves and others that social hierarchy is the result of intrinsic qualities of people or knowledge. This encompasses personality traits such as drive and ambition, ideologies of purer or superior language that subsume less valued accents and dialects, and belief in the normalcy of heterosexuality to the detriment of subordinated sexualities and behaviours. Who gets

access or not, who gets counted or excluded, and what information and knowledge is approved or decimated, all form a queer theoretical foundation.

### *Conclusions*

The paradox of queerly conceptualizing a curriculum model lies in its constant flux, resistance to definition, and perpetual (re)questioning. Queer curriculum models will vary in nature, drive, and form, but all will likely reflect three core elements to some degree: asking questions and creating dialogue, education and space for all, and discourse and symbolic violence. Although words and texts are imperfect, we must use them while simultaneously challenging their shortcomings. As with the premise of much qualitative research, a queer curriculum model aims to heighten self and social awareness. Queerizing should eventually result in the evolution of *metacognitive queer readers* - people may gain reflexive insights into oppressive social structures rooted in sexuality, independent of the originating environment or guidance.

The challenges of developing and implementing a queer curriculum model are great but not insurmountable. Queering curriculum is hard work for queer leaders. As with a transformative, holistic approach, people may resist. The type of queer curriculum model proposed here challenges basic values, customs, and beliefs, and thus can be threatening to one's sense of self; students, teachers, administrators, parents, and community may resist. Furthermore, while few fear being branded Black or Native if advocating rights for these groups, there may be stigma and fear associated with challenging class, able-bodiedness, gender, linguistic and cultural capital, geographical privilege, and sexual norms. However, queer leaders may respond that it is their duty to acknowledge everyone, regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, geographical location, language and culture, and that they want everyone to be able to think and grow. Such is the promise of a queer curriculum model.

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