

May I, Please, Queer Your Kids? The New Queer Pedagogy

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Education should not be about maintaining or defending categories but asking about how categories work.

Deborah Britzman,

Lost subjects, contested objects: Toward a psychoanalytic inquiry of learning

Sara*, Junior Year 2001 at a Spartanburg South Carolina High School: *As I have been thinking about my experience and everything surrounding it, I am realizing where it has brought me. Although it is sometimes painful, I don't reflect on it with anger or hurt. I dealt with being angry about it in therapy, years ago, and have since looked upon it in a much different way. I gain strength from it, knowing that had it not been for everything that happened, I probably would not be the woman that you know. That said here is some of my story....*

Shortly after everyone found out about me, one of my teachers asked to speak with me after class. I didn't know what it was about, as far as I knew I had done nothing wrong. He told me how well I was doing in class. He wasn't a teacher I particularly liked, but I knew I did well in his class, so I didn't really understand why he was talking to me. Until he began telling me that he had heard things about me. I knew exactly what he was talking about but this was the first time a teacher was bringing it up. I asked him what he meant and he told me that a group of teachers were talking about me in the lounge the other day. He proceeded to go into how he thought I needed to pipe things down and not talk about it. He found it disturbing that the teachers were even talking about me and didn't know why I had to make it a big deal. I realized that he was telling me to shut up, to let everything go and then people would stop talking because it made him uncomfortable that he had a gay student. I was furious, but didn't know what to do. This was coming from teachers, the very people who were supposed to protect me. I didn't do anything about what he said. I didn't know what I could do.

Sara's testimonial links the current educational and administrative preoccupation of queerness and gayness in the American Public School system to our not-so-distant past of continued student abuse. What is particularly striking about this portion of her interview is the predominance of teacher-to-teacher regulation, the teacher's shame concerning non-conformist students, and the overarching and entrenched behavioral expectations for both teacher and student. To add more layers to this already rich excerpt, our teacher in question is an African-American man teaching in a highly conservative Southern school. His request to not "make a big deal" about sexuality underlines the following prejudice—one's sexuality has little or nothing to do with school and learning. Coming from a racial minority perspective, sexual minority issues take a blow. How does Sara's suggested minority status differ so radically from his racial minority status to be outside the realm of speech and, it seems even, her own bodily protection? What privileges

race over sexuality and sexual behavior in this situation? And why do these contradictions in privilege exist and thrive in our educational climate where some forms of discrimination are controlled and regulated?

Another important point to be raised is the language Sara uses to describe her experience. Despite her assertion that therapy has aided her in moving beyond these traumatic experiences, she still cannot name them. “It” reverberates throughout her piece: “Although *it* is sometimes painful, I don’t reflect on *it* with anger or hurt. I dealt with being angry about *it* in therapy, years ago, and have since looked upon *it* in a much different way. I gain strength from *it*....” Kate Evans in *Negotiating the Self* highlights the predominance of “it” in stories of sexual otherness. “In fact, ‘it’ emphasizes the power of language: to name it makes it ‘real,’ and to not name it can emphasize one’s disregard or disgust for ‘it.’ ‘It’ can be both dehumanizing, and a marker of the power of ‘it.’ Is ‘it’ the unspeakable? The worst possible (thus unnamable) thing?”² Can it then be true that Sara has internalized the silence pushed on her by her teachers and school administrations? If so, this serves point to highlight the tremendous impact teacher behavior, reaction, and evaluation of sexual otherness in school have on student awareness of subject matter and also of themselves.

Britzman’s opening quote speaks to the confusing issue of teaching about self and other and overarching social identity categories.³ She neither condemns one category nor heralds another, such as heterosexual versus homosexual, in educational discourse. Rather she maintains educators’ purpose is to attempt to explain how these categories arise. In retrospect, this statement despite its simple assertion is highly critical and advanced. Britzman hits the root of educational paranoia when it comes to sexuality and sexual otherness. Eve Sedgwick further explains this dilemma: “Simply put, paranoia tends to be contagious; more specifically, paranoia is drawn toward and tends to construct symmetrical relations, in particular, symmetrical epistemologies.”⁴ By asserting the contagion of queerness, any school system, any teacher, any student, and any administrator has an increased chance of exposure. Paranoia becomes the vaccine to this social disease. It has seeped into pedagogical practices resulting in the devaluation and disgust with which queer studies is viewed in mainstream educational discussions. In advocating queer learning spaces, educational institutions run the risk of losing all categories, run the risk of leaving all subject matter ripe learning material, and inadvertently allow for provocative and resistant citizens to thrive. In linking this theoretical pondering to my opening example it makes perfect sense that Sara was told to “pipe down.” Keep it quiet. Don’t disturb your role because you unsettle mine.

Yet it does not have to be all downhill. Eve Sedgwick draws attention to the rampant policed lines of school paranoia and sees an opening. She states, “finding myself as teacher, as exemplar, as persuader, as reader to be less and less at the center of my own classroom, I was also finding that the voice of a certain abyssal displacement—and mine was certainly not the only such

displacement going on in these classrooms—could provide effects that might sometimes wrench the boundaries of discourse around in productive if not always obvious ways.”⁵ Where educational paranoia seems to have become a sort of educational paralysis, with any adverse learning, learners, or educators suspended in mid-air, bulges present themselves on the lines of repressed versus nurtured knowledge, perverse versus natural knowledge, and perverted versus decent educators. These bulges are crucial.

Throughout the course of this essay, I have chosen to describe non-normative sexuality, sexual discussions, and sexual beliefs as the Sexual Other instead of the widely used term Sexual Minority.⁶ I have diverged from this term for the following reasons. No longer is the term “sexual minority” revolutionizing as in the Rubin sense.⁷ “The time has come to think about sex. To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine, or nuclear annihilation. But it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality.”⁸ Modern American society thinks about sex all the time.

Something more dangerous is lurking than silence about sex. As consumers we are bombarded with images of sex—the more non-normative the higher the pay-off.⁹ Society has become fascinated with sexual minority behavior and has adjusted accordingly by ripping off and co-opting what was previously viewed as rebellious. These former rebellions now are entangled in the politics of radical differentiation—“we may look and act like *that*, but we are not the same.” Likewise, total legal and educational repression of homosexual relationships is no longer uniform or unilateral. For example, in the Massachusetts Public Schools educational discussions about gay and lesbian sexual identity are common place supporting the state’s recent legalization of same-sex marriages. Instead, what has happened now is a political, legal, and educational polarization when it comes to sex. What have been lost are all the facets within the framework of sexual minorities. And what we have been given is a simplified, more stabilized view of a chosen sexual minority utopia. For these reasons, my identity as a Sexual Minority educator or identification as a member of a cohesive Sexual Minority group has become quite confusing. Taking a few steps backward in my own personal quest for legal and political rights, my vantage point as an educator has become to advocate for more developed, analytical discussions concerning the nature of oppression and its links to mental forms of rebellion that resist educational institutionalization.

To spearhead this approach, I am relying on two examples concerning my sexual orientation and body politics as a Boston Public student teacher in the spring of 2005. I find these analogies ripe for comparison to the regional treatment of sexuality in Sara’s narrative but also the more ubiquitous concern over the limitations in the concept Sexual Minority. Furthermore, I inject the conundrum of queer action and queer identity into educational discourse through a unique body

politic—mine not the only one. What I seek to offer through this pedagogical exegesis is a how-to speak about, learn from, and communally benefit from sexual otherness and queerness in general. Most importantly, it is my desire to unearth the stabilizing effects of the Sexual Minority category, to speak about what has been covered up by dominant sexual discourse not by way of just silence, or overt forms of discrimination, but by way of embracing previously marginalized forms of identity and behavior to the exclusion of those even more destabilizing. Lastly, in accordance with Eve Sedgwick, Gayle Rubin, Deborah Britzman, and Kate Evans, Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant's article "Sex in Public" as well as Kevin Kumashiro's book *Troubling Education: Queer Activism and Antioppressive Pedagogy* offer invaluable insights and resources.

Heterosexist hegemony is rampant in the American School System. It can be noticeably discerned in Southern conservative communities but is equally prevalent in our Northern cities despite liberal political policies. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner point out: "hegemonies are nothing if not elastic, involving dispersed and contradictory strategies for self-maintenance and reproduction."¹⁰ It is these contradictions I am focusing on in examples at Boston Public School X.¹¹

During my first week of student teaching a particularly interesting and poignant conversation took place between me and my assigned cooperating teacher. Aside from dealing with reactions and assumptions made about student teachers—lack of experience, unaware of "real-life" educational drama, etc.—this interaction laid the groundwork for a difficult practicum. As a self-identified, multi-dimensional, queer gay femme woman¹², I felt invested in knowing school reaction to other queer and/or gay identified teachers. I was promptly informed of our one openly gay male teacher and his problematic position as a white man in a largely non-white school and student body. When I further inquired about any female queer or gay identified teachers, I received the following statement: "I do not know any openly gay women at the school but when I went to Smith College as an undergraduate and for a couple years after I dated women, so I can be a representative." About four months later, after much watching for her disclosure of her unknown, potentially queer status to no avail, I received the following advice about "coming out" in my later teaching positions. "I don't respect teachers that fail to come out. I am, in fact, totally against it," she declared with much pride and conviction. Hegemonic sexuality had been set.

The second example I draw from my time spent at Boston Public School X centers around student reactions to my sexual identity. During my coursework as their student teacher, I would be participating in history exhibitions and research papers. In formulating the research questions with my cooperating teacher, we included various topics centering on issues of sexuality in American history, for example:

1. How did issues of sexuality clash with the religious beliefs that guided the Civil Rights Movement during the 1950s and 1960s?

2. Is the Gay Rights Movement necessary? Why or why not?

Several students jumped at the chance to talk about this topic, particularly to address the recent legalization of same-sex marriage in their state. Despite my known identity politics, my cooperating teacher refused to grant me position as first informant on the movement and queer politics in general maintaining she was able to teach this topic with as much knowledge and understanding. It took students working on these two questions to refuse her help. They later confessed to me they did not think she was capable of helping them to the same degree. The private heterosexism apparent in the first example now morphed into the privileged yet threatened space of heteronormativity.

“A whole field of social relations becomes intelligible as heterosexuality, and this privatized sexual culture bestows on its sexual practices a tacit sense of rightness and normalcy. This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just sex—is what we call heteronormativity.”¹³ Through this teacher’s embrace of the topic (thing) of gay and lesbian history and the Gay Rights Movement, she became increasingly insensitive to a queer body in her classroom, queer politics that may or may not overlap with gay politics, and to a certain extent successfully denied students access to appropriate resources. Kevin Kumashiro relates this predicament to educational discourse. “[E]ducation involves learning something that disrupts our commonsense view of the world. The crisis that results from unlearning, then, is a necessary and desirable part of antioppressive education. Desiring to learn involves desiring difference and overcoming our resistance to discomfort.”¹⁴ What my cooperating teacher repeatedly rebuffed was her personal discomfort of subversive knowledge and questions, thereby gripping her traditional authority as classroom teacher with an iron fist. She would not relinquish this control no matter how much it may benefit her student teacher or students. However, few recognized the transparency of this dilemma and those that did had little or no power to challenge her.

What these two examples coupled with the earlier testimony of a young gay youth in the American South aptly demonstrate is the interconnectedness of heterosexist culture, heteronormativity, and what Britzman calls straight reading in educational spaces. Despite a difference of four years in these two vignettes and despite major legal regional distinctions—Massachusetts is the only state that sanctions same-sex marriage—the power of the straight educational world stares us in the face. When issues of queerness, myself being representative of this view throughout my narrative, intersect, conflict, and crash into mainstream society’s view of the gay and lesbian citizen subject, queer always loses. What I have attempted to do is to pull off the veil of acceptance and to uncover even deeper threads of anti-queer sentiment in American educational discourse, by describing one queer body’s attempt to teach and to learn. What I desire is further study into the realm of queerness in the public space of the classroom and the connection between my specific type of queerness to other forms. How do these other queer bodies operate in school? What problems do they hit up against as queer teachers? And lastly, how can we, as queer educators, protect

our investments and teaching approaches, and yield positive pedagogical results.

Throughout my course as student teacher, I found my embrace of Queer to rein students in, to pull out questions they felt uncomfortable to ask before, and to crack the foundation of our minority inclusion of Gay and Lesbian as a sound pedagogical approach. Britzman sings the benefits of queer, "Queer Theory occupies a difficult space between the signifier and the signified, where something queer happens to the signified—to history and to bodies—and something queer happens to the signifier—to language and to representation. Queer Theory offers methods of critiques to mark the repetitions of normalcy as a structure and as a pedagogy."¹⁵ Perhaps when all is said and done, queer will be indistinguishable from any other social body because queer educators have sought to question the lines of natural, normal, and perverse knowledge. And because they have disturbed their own roles to the benefit of disrupting everyone else's.

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