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Sexuality, schooling, and teacher identity formation: A critical pedagogy for teacher education

Michael Vavrus*

The Evergreen State College, 2700 Evergreen Parkway NW, Olympia, WA 98505, USA

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ABSTRACT

Offering an alternative to normative teacher education that excludes meaningful sexuality and gender education from its curriculum, this article presents a critical teacher education multicultural curriculum based in the United States that included an autoethnographic narrative assignment as reflective space for teacher candidates to consider their identities as shaped by lived experiences with gender and sexuality. Using a categorical analysis of a cohort of 38 teacher candidate autoethnographies, discussed are insights revealed about their lived histories. Patterns included gender identification, heteronormativity, patriarchy, sex education, schooling experiences, teacher complicity, and teacher identity effects and sense of agency along with implications for educating future teachers.

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1. Introduction

Public school teachers daily enact curricula that tend to sublimate students' sexuality and gender identification concerns to school hallways, Internet chat rooms, or dreaded and embarrassed silences. Throughout their schooling years children and youth experience physiological changes that affect their social–psychological identity and state of well-being (Maccoby, 2005), yet adult culture generally avoids helping young people to understand the social, emotional, and political dynamics that are associated with these physical and affective developments and desires. Developmental psychologists Cole, Cole, and Lightfoot (2005) explain that

as a domain of identity formation, sexuality is importantly unique...[and] is not a frequent topic of conversation between adolescents and their parents, peers, or school counsellors. As a society, we do not go out of our way to provide adolescents with opportunities to explore their sexuality. (p. 643)

This overall avoidance of meaningful discussions of sexuality between adults and youth occurs where, according to the National Center for Health Statistics, approximately 20% of young people in the United States have engaged in sexual intercourse before the age of 15 (Kelly, 2005). Furthermore, “88 percent of middle and high schoolers who pledge to stay virgins until marriage end up having premarital sex anyway...[and] are less likely to use contraception”

(Kelly, 2005, Teaching the children, ¶2). School district responses range from a few newsworthy ones that include sexual orientation and condom use in their sex education programs (de Vise, 2007; Zemias, 2007) to those who advocate “abstinence only” or are “abstinence based” and disallow directions on condom applications (Buhain, 2007; Jayson, 2007). This technical, “anti-sex” pattern is replicated not only in the United States, but also in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia in contrast to the Netherlands' “emphasis on ‘relationship’ education” (Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2001, p. 131; also see Robinson & Ferfolja, 2007).

Additionally, U.S. students who are outside the heterosexual norm – such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) youth – report higher incidences of harassment or violence than other students and lack confidence in school officials coming to their assistance (GLSEN, 2005). Bullying in general takes a significant toll on victims. This kind of harassment “one of the most common forms of stress among young people, and people who are bullied have more physical illness, more school absence, lower academic achievement, and are more likely to become bullies themselves over time” (HealthDay News, 2007, ¶16).

Schools reflect a general societal ambivalence toward gender identification and sexuality. For example, New York City officially proposed a rule that would allow individuals to change their documented sex, only to drop the proposal within a few weeks under public pressure (Cave, 2006a, 2006b). Yet, in one reported case, Los Angeles Unified School District recognizes students' chosen gender and requires that educators address students with an appropriate corresponding gender pronoun (Brown, 2006). To

* Tel.: +1 360 867 6638.

E-mail address: vavrusm@evergreen.edu

this conflicted milieu is added the recent controversy over a Newberry award-winning children's book being banned – with school librarians leading the censorship charge – for using the word “scrotum” as the identifying body part of a dog that had been bitten by a rattlesnake (Bosman, 2007).

The general silence and unease with issues of sexuality by teachers has been accentuated by three decades of political attacks on public schools led in the U.S. largely by radical Christian fundamentalist, a group Pulitzer Prize winning author Hedges (2006) identifies as “American fascists.” At the base of this political censoring is a puritanism and revulsion against the values of feminism that denounce patriarchal oppressiveness. Supported by “wealthy, right-wing sponsors” (p. 14), this rise of an evangelical Christian hegemony within schools has accompanied an “anti-feminist backlash [that] has been set off not by women's achievement of full equality but by the increased possibilities that they might win it” (Faludi, 1991, p. xx). The aversion to calls for LGBT equity and more candid and helpful conversations about gender and sexuality with young people is an extension of an attack on feminism. This political effort attempts to manage the sexuality of young people toward a patriarchal-driven heterosexual norm. All of this takes place under increasing conditions of surveillance and auditing of teacher actions in concert with a narrowing and standardizing of a curriculum focused on student test scores. Reductionist schooling goals reflect an increasing encroachment of capitalist market forces and competitive conditions that have “compromised” support for “pupils' social and emotional development” (Alldred & David, 2007, p. 172). In the meantime teacher preparation programs increasingly are externally managed to limit their multicultural expressions (Vavrus, 2002), including the equity topic of sexuality when it moves beyond heteronormative boundaries.

2. Teacher education's normative response

The result of this patriarchal discourse for future teachers and their students is a normative teacher education that excludes meaningful sexuality and gender education from its curriculum. Teachers are apt to report a lack of preparation to engage in such topics with their students. When teachers have received some training, it is at best around the rudiments of the physiology of sex education (Alldred & David, 2007; Howard-Barr, Reinzo, Pigg, & James, 2005; Price, Drake, Kirchofer, & Tellijohann, 2003). In her study of public schooling in England, Kehily (2002) notes, “The official classroom task sees sex education in terms of technical knowledge...while pupil interactions stress the importance of the experiential and the instrumental role of the peer group in key aspects of social learning” (p. 67).

The privileging of a technical notion of sexuality over the actual desires and experiences of young people is informed by “compulsory heterosexuality” (Rich, 1983). As an inherent aspect of heterosexist discourse to limit imageries of possibilities, compulsory heterosexuality exists when a

diverse set of social practices – from the linguistic to the physical, in the public sphere and the private sphere, covert and overt – in an array of social arenas (including work, school, church), in which the binary distinction of homosexual (attracted to members of the same sex) versus heterosexual (attracted to members of the opposite sex) is at work in such a way that heterosexuality is privileged. (Scott & Marshall, 2005)

In this atmosphere public school students find themselves in a caldron filled with sexuality and gender identification anxieties that can spill over into all aspects of their lives, including their academic engagement (Cole et al., 2005; Kehily, 2002; Kumashiro, 2001; Lipkin, 2004; Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000). Despite this

social-psychological research on the welfare of children and youth along with research on early professional education as it affects teacher identity formation (e.g., Lasky, 2005), teacher educators as well as the preservice and inservice teachers with whom they work “are likely to be legitimately anxious about the reactions of some parents and, worse, the popular press if they stray into territory considered by some to be too risky (even risqué)” (Epstein et al., 2001, p. 136).

An oft-cited rationale for exclusion in the elementary education teacher preparatory curriculum is because young children are at developmental age when they are innocent of sexuality. This assertion is made despite the kind of sexualized talk and playground games that children regularly perform. Epstein et al. (2001) explain in their literature review of international research on sexuality and schooling that “heterosexuality in one form or another is the pervasive imagined future for children...These expectations are routinely confirmed by teachers, even well-meaning ones, whose intension are not heterosexist” (p. 138; also see Blaise, 2005).

At the middle and high school levels it is not unusual to hear teachers and their teacher educators explain adolescent manifestations of sexuality and gender identification formation as simply a case of “raging hormones.” This asserted folk-biological knowledge permits many educators to conveniently compartmentalize this developmental facet of young people outside the scope of schooling. This is a time when “heterosexuality is expected to break out and yet remain taboo in the secondary school” (Epstein et al., 2001, p. 139).

3. Challenges to deconstructing heteronormativity

Cameron and Kulick (2006) in their introduction to *The Language and Sexuality Reader* further describe heteronormativity as “an overarching system for organizing and regulating sexuality, whereby certain ways of acting, thinking and feeling about sex are privileged over others,” recognizing that “not all expressions of heterosexuality are equal” (p. 9). Queer theory is used, then, as “an inquiry into the nature and workings of heteronormativity, along with the ‘queer’ sexualities that heteronormativity produces by stigmatizing, silencing and or proscribing them” (p. 10). Cameron and Kulick carefully note that the use of *queer* is not intended to be equated with homosexual “but rather ‘non- or anti-heteronormative’ [because] straight people and heterosexual practices can also be ‘queer’ if they deviate from the heteronormative ideal” (p. 10).

Thoughtful teacher educators who write about their attempts to incorporate sexuality and gender identification into the curriculum by countering the normalization of heterosexuality have acknowledged the challenges while also questioning the effectiveness of their efforts (e.g., Asher, 2007; Gust, 2007; MacIntosh, 2007). Their common approach is “queering” the curriculum. This critical pedagogy is not about reifying rigid notions of a normative dichotomous sexuality between hetero and gay/lesbian, but instead focuses on deconstructing and decentring normative heterosexuality. The purpose of this approach is to help education students, especially the majority heterosexual population, to examine how their own sense of sexuality and gender identification is imbued with various degrees of compulsory heterosexuality and the resultant problematic effects this can have for *all* young people at various stages of identity development.

The goal of queering the curriculum has some similarities with the multicultural analysis of Banks' (1993) in regards to “positionality” and teacher identity formation where “important aspects of our identity...are markers of *relational positions* rather than essential qualities” (emphasis added) (p. 5). In his use of positionality Banks was specifically interested in having teachers, especially

those who identify as white, understand how an unspoken normalized white identity can perpetuate the costs of institutional racism while continuing to create dire consequences for students of colour. A parallel purpose for queering the curriculum is found with educators who use a queer approach to make visible the harm of heteronormativity for gay and lesbian students as well as those who identify as heterosexual. This is necessary because “many heterosexual students have limited reference points from which to engage queer themes...[and] those in dominant, unmarked groups often feel they have an entitlement to maintain their ignorance” (Epstein et al., 2001, p. 166). Whereas when issues of race and white privilege are introduced in a multicultural education course, many white students predictably “react emotionally to a disequilibrium that has been created within their formerly assumed stable and normalized white identities” (Vavrus, 2002, p. 97), this can also be the case when teacher educators “deconstruct the mythic heterosexual norm” and receive responses from compulsively hetero-centric students that are often ones of “trepidation, resistance, and even anger” (Asher, 2007, p. 67).

Despite insightful analyses of heteronormativity and pedagogical efforts to help bring their students to a critical consciousness to act against the negative effects of compulsory heterosexuality, teacher educators Asher (2007), Gust (2007), and MacIntosh (2007), for example, all express their respective frustrations at what can be accomplished within a single course. This is not different from widely expressed dissatisfaction over one course in the teacher education curriculum being held responsible to bring future teachers to an anti-racist identity. Thus, critical multicultural educators have realized that issues of race and racism need to be incorporated throughout the teacher education curriculum rather than sequestered in a single course or, even more problematic, in one workshop or lecture (Vavrus, 2002). This call for extended teacher education time is important for all multicultural topics and their intersections which is captured in Asher's (2007) questions:

What do we need to do to enable teachers to identify, engage, and unpack the nuance, context-specific differences at the intersections of race, culture, gender, and sexuality that they encounter on a daily basis? How can we foster critical, self-reflexive ways of teaching that promote equity and democratic ways of being? (p. 66)

In regards to the topics of sexuality, teacher identity formation, and the subsequent effects on student learning and social well-being – which are the primary focus of this article – MacIntosh (2007) further asks about the teacher education curriculum, “How do we move beyond antihomophobia curricula?” (p. 36). MacIntosh's question is embedded in a much more profound concern when she also challenges teacher educators to consider, “[H]ow can we begin to help early-career teachers see the deleterious impact of heteronormativity in the everyday lives of their student if they cannot yet begin to see its more immediate presence in their curricula and classrooms” (p. 34)? Likewise, Gust (2007) grapples with how teacher educators can move preservice teachers beyond posturing identities that appear to be inclusive in their language yet are careful to protect their dominant heterosexual status and discourses.

The remainder of this article describes an aspect of a teacher education curriculum that is infused with a critical pedagogy on multicultural topics presented through seminars on critical texts, workshops/lectures, and guided autoethnographic explorations. The purpose here is to offer an example of a teacher education curricular approach that is responsive to the concerns and questions raised above. Emphasized is the transformative aspect of the inclusion of autoethnographic narratives that can provide a critically reflective space for teacher candidates to consider their

teacher identity formations as shaped by their lived experiences with gender and sexuality.

4. Deepening critical pedagogy: methodological considerations

Elsewhere I have referred to a combination of critical pedagogy (e.g., Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003) with the structured use of autoethnography with students as “*deep* critical pedagogy” to mean “the purposeful incorporation into critical pedagogy social-psychological forces that interact with individual subjectivities in the formation of identities and subsequent behaviors” (Vavrus, 2006, p. 92). This approach combines critical texts that education students interrogate through seminar dialogue, related lectures/workshops, ethnographic observations in field experiences, and guided ethnographic narratives. For immersion in the topic of sexuality and gender identity, extended in-classroom contact time over a concentrated 3 week period – approximately 18 h – was critical to this approach. This concentrated time allocation was enabled by my working with two other colleagues team-teaching this content.¹ The placement of this curricular incorporation was in the third academic quarter of a six quarter graduate-level teacher preparation program that included a cohort of 38 students.

A working hypothesis for this approach was that by having preservice teachers explore their own experiences and received messages about gender identity and sexuality – especially as related to their own elementary and secondary schooling experiences – in a critical pedagogical context, they would be more receptive and empathic to the gender identity and sexuality issues of their own students, broaden their concept of an inclusive classroom, and consider creating transformative curricular experiences within their disciplines that can relate to gender identity and sexuality.

This hypothesis acknowledges that teacher identities, teacher behaviours, and schooling are influenced by broad social and historical forces. The recognition and acceptance of an identity as a “teacher” is significantly affected by the accumulation process of capitalism that results in concurrent market-driven competitive expectations for individuals and institutions. Hence, this research positions each teacher's identity as fluid, situation specific, and historically contingent on power relations that constitute a society's cultural, political, and economic practices (see Gee, 2001). Within these interactive tensions between individuals and social institutions, identities are constructed and reconstructed over time. If we understand discourse as how practices of language, social structures, and power relations are interwoven (Wolfreys, Robbins, & Womack, 2006), embedded in individual identity formation are discourses that may seem natural yet have historically been constructed through external messages that affect subsequent individual actions. How teachers can critically interpret these forces not only as constraints of dominance but as possible windows for resistance and transformative action motivates this research. This approach attempts to act on Kincheloe's (2005) concern: “Teacher education provides little insight into the forces that shape identity and consciousness” (p. 155).

The autoethnography was methodologically applied for its potential to serve “as a critical intervention in the social, political, and cultural life” (Jones, 2005, p. 763) of teacher candidates as well as a personal text that “reveals concretely realized patterns in one's own actions rather than the actions of others” (Roth, 2005, p. 4). Additionally, autoethnographies as “narratives do not simply

¹ To learn more about how an extended time, team-teaching structure can work, see Vavrus (2002, chap. 8, “Learning Communities for Multicultural Teacher Education”). Special thanks goes to team-teaching colleagues Simona Sharoni and Patricia Finnegan.

provide evidence about individuals, but provide a means to understand more about the broader culture shared by a community of individuals" (Elliott, 2005, p. 28). Hence, autoethnographies do not end with the individual but are intended to propel the teacher education student into critical insights as to how their own subjective meanings connect to wider social phenomena and how emancipatory action is possible within a newly constructed "cultural worker" identity (Freire, 2005).

Limitations exist to actually capturing the full scope of such complex phenomena associated with the topic of this research. Thus, the project reported here is understood as one possible intervention to help teacher candidates name and better recognize their location and potential agency within the dominance of heteronormativity.

5. Critical autoethnographies and teacher identity formation

Deepening critical pedagogy required going beyond the norm of relying only on texts, seminars, and lectures – as vital as these critical components are. The autoethnographic writing expectation, however, was not assigned in vacuum, but was contextualized by teacher candidates' concurrent engagement with a critical curriculum. For example, texts and chapters studied included *Sexuality, gender and schooling* (Kehily, 2002), *Beyond diversity day: a Q&A on gay and lesbian issues in schools* (Lipkin, 2004), "Revisioning multiculturalism in teacher education: isn't it queer?" (Letts, 2002), and "Heterosexism in middle schools" (Mandel & Shakeshaft, 2000). Students also viewed the 20th century segment of *The history of sex* (Milio, Peltier, & Hufnail, 2002) and *Oliver Button is a star* (Hunt, 2001), the latter a children's film about sex roles and stereotypes. *The war on boys* (Whidbey Films, 1999) was shown in order to demonstrate a patriarchal distortion of gender studies research. In addition to two workshops on gender roles and homophobia in schools, a guest speaker from Planned Parenthood spoke on the differences between a technocratic sex education and a critically informed sexuality education. Teacher candidates in their weekly field experiences in elementary and secondary schools were also required to maintain written journals in which they responded to ethnographic prompts related to their observations about gender and sexuality.²

Personal narratives such as this autoethnography assignment in the context of critical pedagogy provided prospective teachers an opportunity to address issues related to sexuality and gender identification for themselves and to use this personal and social knowledge to consider their pedagogical dispositions and practices. The importance of this cannot be over-emphasized because it is the experiences and identities of teachers that affect how they approach issues of sexuality with their students (Kehily, 2002). Even when a multicultural curriculum is well-intentioned in its social justice goals, excluding opportunities for education students to explore their personal and professional identity formation can limit the effectiveness of a curriculum that attempts to transform approaches to sexuality education (Ressler, 2001).

Engaging in personal narratives was further supported by one of the authors students had studied, Kehily (2002), who observed, "I have found auto/biographical methods particularly useful for reflecting on my own investments in researching issues of sexuality and schooling" (p. 13). Students were specifically asked to create an ethnographic personal narrative that incorporated prompts about their lived histories in regards to their sexuality that included gender identification, sexual orientation, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and most importantly their teacher identity formation.³ As

part of a human subjects review process for this study, explicit directions to students guaranteed their anonymity along with the knowledge that their responses would not be evaluated beyond noting the assignment as completed/not completed. In this way teacher candidates were encouraged to write for their own benefit in order to better understand the formation of their teacher identities grounded in their lived experiences as opposed to composing an essay to gain favour with a researcher-professor. Writing prompts were generally structured with the intent to generate "observation sentences close to actual events" that is characteristic of autoethnographies (Breuer & Roth, 2005, p. 429). In combination with their academic studies, the incorporation of an autoethnographic assignment was a recognition of "the inextricability of social identification and academic learning" (Wortham, 2006, p. 23).

6. What was revealed/what was learned

In an analysis of teacher candidate autoethnographies (based on approximately 500 pages of generated autoethnographic narratives), a content or "categorical analysis" (Elliott, 2005, p. 38) yielded insightful information about teacher candidates, including the revealing of minority sexual orientations as well as ambiguities about the location of their own sexualities. Apparently, generating personal revelations about sexuality that do not reflect dominant heteronormativity are relatively rare in teacher education as reported recently by Asher (2007) and Gust (2007). Yet, this was not necessarily the primary purpose of this curriculum although it did contribute to teacher candidates talking more candidly and comfortably about sexuality and gender identification in text-based seminars.

What follows is a brief summary of the categorical or content analysis of this qualitative information. I use the final sections of this article to consider the effects of this curriculum as presented in teacher candidate autoethnographies on their respective teacher identity formations.

6.1. Common patterns

From their autoethnographies, common patterns emerged among teacher candidates. These categorical patterns were found in their own elementary and secondary schooling experiences as students as related to gender identification, normalization of heterosexuality, sex education, middle school experience, and teacher complicity. In many instances, the experiences of these education students mirrored research findings on sexuality and gender identity in public schools (Epstein et al., 2001; Kehily, 2002).

Gender identification. All of the teacher candidates wrote about experiencing both subtle and direct expectations to behave according to traditionally prescribed gender roles. Breaking out of those roles risked being ridiculed by peers and labelled deviant, what one heterosexual male described recalling as early as 2nd grade as "gender anxiety." A female teacher candidate, for example, learned in elementary school that "girls were friends, boys were boyfriends." All the male teacher candidates ($n = 18$) reported expectations to exhibit masculine qualities throughout their schooling. Males participated in and/or were subjected to sexist and homophobic discourses. Within this social dynamic, privilege was acquired by displays of masculinity.

Among female respondents ($n = 20$) it was not uncommon for them to acknowledge that their behaviour in secondary school had been conditioned to please males as a means of acceptance from both male and female peers. As one female succinctly put it, "I did a lot things because of boys." Another heterosexual female reacted to traditional gender role expectations by "not feeling like a girl" when she was in school. Even in the one report of a 6th grade

² Ethnographic field prompts are available from the author.

³ Autoethnographic narrative prompts are available from the author.

teacher bringing a female scientist to her classroom as a guest speaker, a female preservice teacher noted how the girls in her class, including herself, believed this role as not being “cool” for a woman.

All of the women in this study reported some degree of discomfort with gender role expectations during their elementary and secondary schooling. A quarter of the women actually noted their continuing discomfort with their own gender identification. In summary, each woman in this study had some kind of story where in hindsight they received the brunt of what they now understood as sexism and misogyny that was allowed within schools.

Normalization of heterosexuality. In relation to their elementary and secondary schools' climate, all the education students wrote about how an assumed heterosexuality was the norm. Just two teacher candidates could recall experiences in their schooling where a teacher had acknowledged homosexuality as a legitimate sexual orientation or that homosexuals had made constructive contributions to U.S. culture. Most, as one subject summarized, did “not recall anybody who openly identified as homosexual, bisexual, or transgender in any of my [elementary and secondary] school years.” Instead, when they did receive a direct message about homosexuality, it was in relation to disease, “a concept of ‘homosexual’ that was directly linked to AIDS,” as one preservice teacher put it. All the teacher candidates in this study had heard unchallenged homophobic slurs during their schooling.

One woman who identified as lesbian recalled, “I knew somehow that talking about being attracted to girls would not be okay.” A heterosexual male realized that “the threat of being labelled gay affected my interests and talents,” eventually leaving his enjoyment of participating in music and theatre in favour of athletics. In one case a male who identified as homosexual described his near suicidal anguish in high school and his sense of isolation from his peers and any adult – his parents or teachers included – for any support for his burgeoning sexual orientation realization. One heterosexual young man talked about when he was going through a difficult time and sought out his mother who prefaced her comments with “the only thing that you could do that would make me ashamed of you would be to tell me you are gay.”

At the time of this study, some subjects reported guilty and confused feelings for their actions or inactions in regards to homosexuality. This included two individuals who identified as homosexual and two as bisexual who reported degrees of internalized homophobia despite their openly acknowledged sexual orientations. One male who identified as heterosexual revealed that in middle school he had experimented sexually with other males and his unsatisfactory experiences resulted in feelings of homophobia. Seven of the teacher candidates reported that despite public perceptions of their heterosexuality, their sense of their sexual orientation was self-described respectively as “asexuality,” “ambiguous,” “tricky and confusing,” “indefinable,” “not a 100% heterosexual being,” “bi-sexual,” and “don't feel homosexual, I don't feel heterosexual.” Yet, these seven, like all the subjects, experienced substantial pressures to behave in a recognizable heterosexual manner.

Sex education. Sex education curricular encounters for all the teacher candidates had been defined by technical physiological information, generally provided once or twice throughout their entire elementary and secondary school years for an approximate total of 1–2 h of instruction in gender segregated settings. One male recalled,

Sex education was an uncomfortable experience for me. I remember the boys and girls being separated and shuffled into separate rooms to watch a video with our parents about sex. I must have been in fifth or sixth grade. I was so uncomfortable watching the video and I wanted to run out of the room. After

the video my parents never talked to me about the things that I had learned. They treated it as a necessary evil that wasn't to be discussed further.

Human sexual functioning and sexually transmitted diseases were common topics with occasional advocacy for abstinence. In all cases sex education was focused exclusively on heterosexuality with no acknowledgement of other sexual orientations or what constitutes sexual abuse.

The affective relational aspect of sexuality was never discussed in the school curriculum. “There was an emotional piece about sex that no one had talked about, certainly not in any health class,” one female teacher candidate reported, recalling how in 10th grade a friend's “whole personality crumbled” when she learned that she was pregnant. “What is rarely touched upon,” one male noted, “is the tremendous value and comfort of having another person who loves you, and whom you love.” Only in one instance did a teacher candidate note that a public school teacher had conveyed that “sex was a healthy way of showing love” although this was couched in the framework of heterosexual marriage.

Hence, teacher candidates saw sexuality as having encapsulated taboo aspects of their lives. As one preservice teacher put it, “I came to associate sexuality as something you have to sneak around to do.” Because sex education emphasized outcomes, one male realized, “I rarely find myself discussing [sex and sexuality] as a ‘process.’” A male in writing his autoethnography concluded about his sex education, “I learned to leave questions about sex and sexuality in my heart.”

Middle school. The adolescent years of middle school were consistently mentioned by all preservice teachers as the schooling period that held the most volatile and significant developmental experiences with gender and sexual identity formation. The change from elementary school to middle school was generally recalled as a dramatic shift. The full impact of patriarchal heteronormativity was felt during middle school, as noted by a female teacher candidate:

By the time seventh grade came rolling around the boys were dominating the classrooms and the leadership positions. This is when the system started developing where a girl would say something and the boys would either shoot it down with a joke or saying it was stupid. This pattern helped manifest an environment where when you opened your mouth you were taking risks, since you were not sure if you were going to stir some reaction, or you would be left alone.

The pressure to be attractive to boys weighed heavily on the female teacher candidates regardless of their current sexual orientation identification. In one case, a female teacher candidate shared,

The worst memory I have of that time was in 7th grade when a friend walked through the entire school dragging me by the hand asking every male we ran into if he would date me [and] not one person said yes....

Another woman stated, “I think it was the fact that other girls had boyfriends and I did not was the issue. I wanted what everyone else wanted—to be like everyone else—normal.”

Consistent for all of the respondents was the desire to be “normal” and to “fit in” during middle school. Often accompanying this yearning for acceptance was bewilderment as to who they were supposed to be sexually. Teacher candidates in their middle school years appeared to have been on their own to figure this out due to an absence of parental and teacher sensitivity and support during this developmental life stage.

Teacher complicity. With the exception of a memorable teacher or two, all of teacher candidates reported that teachers in their

schools participated in the enforcement of traditional gender roles and heteronormativity through overt actions or by their silences. One female preservice teacher now saw how her teachers reinforced the ideal “that boys had more intrinsic value than girls did.” Adding to this perception, one man remembered “when my sixth grade physical education teacher told me that only girls and ‘fags’ cry.” A female teacher candidate shared feedback she had received from a male teacher to whom she confided: “I remember in 8th grade working as a teacher’s aide, I shared a story about a cooking disaster I had had, and he said something like ‘you better get awfully good looking, because you aren’t going to win anyone with your cooking.’” For this woman that experience caused a gender identity awakening: “I think that was the first time I was really consciously aware of a perception of categories, or realms of value for women.” Overall, female teacher candidates were more likely to recall negative experiences with teachers. The most extreme of this was the reporting by a female teacher candidate about the time when she decided to confide in her teacher, the outcome had a lasting negative impact:

Regrettably, a male high school teacher I trusted and respected molested me repeatedly. He completely took advantage of me at a time when he knew I was emotionally vulnerable....His sinister claims of “helping” me feel better about myself only led to discomfort and shame. I find it incomprehensible that I did not stop him.

Intersection of race with gender and sexual identity. Although students were not provided a writing prompt related to race and gender, four education students of colour ($n = 4/8$) and two whites, nevertheless, in their essays brought up race in relation to gender and sexual identity. One heterosexual male of colour reflected on his schooling: “While I was not white, I [was] still treated better than someone who was gay or lesbian.” For a bisexual woman of colour, she recalled first acknowledging her racial identity in high school but kept silent on her sexual orientation. In regards to gender and sexual identity, a heterosexual woman of colour stated, “My peers were concerned with other identity issues like whether or not you were [of a particular ethnic group].” For another heterosexual male of colour, “The ideas of patriarchy and hyper-masculinity...have been mitigated in my experiences by a trumping factor—my race.” A white male connected gender and sexuality discrimination to problems of race: “Like racism, it assumes a self-worth that rests on false assumptions. Also, like racism, it is not just the scorned that are ill-served; those who scorn suffer as well.” A white female teacher candidate concluded, “Like race, white privilege....my personal experience with gender and sexuality will be the base for all dialogue surrounding them in my classroom.” As Asher (2007) has noted, the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality need to be brought to the forefront of the multicultural teacher education curriculum.

6.2. Effects on teacher identity and behaviours

As a result of their teacher education curriculum, including this particular autoethnographical assignment, all teacher candidates expressed increased confidence in being able to consider issues of gender and sexuality as a legitimate part of their teacher identity. Most came to see responsiveness to gender and sexuality for their students as an extension of what they had previously embraced as multicultural inclusion. The range of acceptance of this broadened teacher identity spanned from full inclusion of individual students and the use of a transformative, anti-bias curriculum to a hesitancy as to what they as future teachers might actually be capable of doing in their classrooms.

Classroom environment. All of the preservice teachers envisioned themselves creating open and safe classrooms so that at

a minimum respectful dialogue could be developed. For example, one heterosexual male had come to realize that “it is within my power to listen carefully and sympathetically to a young person troubled and fearful of their own emerging sexual self.” One-fourth of this cohort was explicit about serving as advocates for their students around these issues. Just less than half ($n = 15/38$), however, added that they were capable of empathic behaviour in relation to their students’ struggles to understand their respective gender identities and sexuality.

Curriculum. All but one preservice teacher mentioned that they wanted to create an inclusive curriculum. A biology teacher candidate explained,

Much like the inclusion of a multicultural approach, gender identification and sexual orientation approaches cannot be satisfied by a simple additive approach. When I design curriculum, these issues need to be present at the beginning and provide a foundation from which the students can learn the content of the subject being taught.

With the exception of math and some of the sciences, teacher candidates expressed confidence in their ability to create curriculum and, in some cases, generated a list of feasible topics. During the time that she was studying gender and sexuality issues and writing her autoethnography, a secondary English teacher candidate shared that she had been designing

a curriculum called “Masks We Wear: Challenging the Idea of a Fixed Identity.” In this unit, I will be helping my students to discover the fluidity of their identities and helping them to label some of the masks that society has tried to pin on them and masks that they have pinned on themselves....Within this unit, sexuality will be among the many masks that I ask the students to create and/or write about.

The potentially daunting task to readily create a developmentally appropriate transformative curriculum was acknowledged. A history preservice teacher addressed this concern:

My greatest challenge will be using my own experience and commitment to diversity, as well as perspectives of peers and students, to dissect this normative history in a way that will allow the stories of women, homosexuals, and all sexual minorities to be heard against the raging tsunami of heterosexism.

Fears. Outside the realm of curriculum design, some teacher education students ($n = 16/38$) wrote explicitly about their fears about being a teacher when they have to decide how to respond to issues of gender identity formation and sexuality. The most expressed fear ($n = 6/16$) was their lack of experience in participating in and conducting discussions about sexual orientation. Based on their prior schooling and other personal experiences, four other subjects felt emotionally and cognitively unprepared to respond in a constructive manner to male adolescent development and to expressions of homophobia and hypermasculinity. Working outside traditional norms and the potential of administrative and/or community reprisals or possible firing was the primary concern of three. One individual explained,

The one shortfall I think I have, and I’ve wrestled with this a lot this past week, is the fact I am unwilling to put up gay pride posters in my classroom. I am unwilling to draw attention to myself as a gay-supporting elementary school teacher. Again, the fact I have not definitively decided on my own sexual orientation plays a big part here....Without a partner, male or female, putting up a pride poster leads to nasty speculation. I am fearful of the label in this instance.

One teacher candidate who had revealed a history of sexual abuse feared that when faced with students who were victims of

sexual abuse, she would be incapable of offering such students positive solutions. Another teacher candidate, however, evoked his sense of agency:

While I am aware of the backlash I will receive from community members who might try to push their own political, social or moral agenda, I intend to have data and studies to back up my pedagogical practices proving that they are addressing real student needs.

6.3. Further critical insights on teacher identity formation

In their autoethnographies nearly half of teacher candidates ($n = 17/38$) volunteered information that was not required in the writing prompts about the constructive effects of their teacher education program's curricular effect on them. For many it was the first time they had been publicly exposed to critiques of normative heterosexuality and hypermasculinity. One teacher candidate wrote, "When I first decided to become a teacher, I had never thought I would have to address issues of gender and sexuality."

Cognitive and emotional selves. The curriculum provided new insights for teacher education students into their cognitive knowledge base and their emotional selves. One female contended, "Of all of the power/privilege issues we have discussed during this program, this is the issue I was the most ignorant about." The process of composing and writing the autoethnographies was not considered an easy task, as described in the opening sentences of one male's autoethnography: "This identity entry is extremely personal and private. It has been the most difficult subject covered thus far in the program." A female explained her affective response to this curriculum:

I must admit that I was floored by the flood of emotions that have come up regarding this topic within the last few weeks. I didn't know there was so much shame and fear still there. In a way it infuriates me. I feel like I am too smart and strong for this kind of bullshit insecurities and self-hate, and yet it is there and I feel like I need to face it.

One male confessed,

We discuss quite a lot of issues in class that are from perspectives I would never have considered...Coming to understand the extent of heterosexism has really been quite startling, and at times unsettling. It is sad to think of my own personal complicity, however unintentional.

A male who had participated in expressions of hypermasculinity but perceived himself as an advocate of social justice reflected, "Only now, under the coercive force of the program literature and this very assignment, am I beginning to examine and deconstruct what these identities truly mean and how I came to strongly internalize them." Despite her self-image as a teacher who is inclusive of all learners, one woman acknowledged her own absence of critical reflection on gender and sexuality issues:

Before looking at these issues closely, I don't think I would have recognized my own heteronormative tendencies because of my impression that I am open and accepting of all kinds of people. I certainly would not have recognized the importance of explicitly including LGBT issues in the classroom curriculum.

Heightened sense of agency. Teacher candidates understood from this curricular experience that they have a choice to act – or not to act. The importance of not remaining passive in the face of student developmental needs was particularly heightened for these future teachers. The curriculum for one female secondary teacher candidate

brought me back to the reality of the issues my students may be dealing with and to try not to brush it off as an experience to just

plough through without addressing the subjects of gender roles and sexual orientation.

Despite discomfort with the topic of gender and sexuality, teacher candidates recognized the necessity to engage with their students in this realm. One male expressed it like this: "Until recent readings in the program, I would have been a teacher who avoids answering such questions [about sexuality], yet now I see that such aversion is unacceptable and detrimental to the students' learning." Another male teacher candidate articulated his confidence to create appropriate curriculum based on prior learning in the program: "My multicultural studies in [the program] have prepared me for developing anti-bias curriculum that incorporates a multitude of perspectives and ideas into it, and this can be done with gender identification, sexism and sexual orientation as well."

7. Conclusion

Whereas Kehily (2002) encountered teachers who ranged in their levels of enlightenment in regards to gender and sexuality identity formation, those particular teachers appeared to lack the capacity for critical reflection that could serve as a basis for constructive action on behalf of young people. Teacher candidates affected by this particular multicultural curriculum through a deep critical pedagogy that incorporated a guided autoethnographic narrative assignment, though, expressed varying degrees of a critical consciousness that can serve as a necessary foundation to assist the developmental needs of elementary and secondary school students. Engagement in their autoethnographical explorations overall helped this cohort of future teacher to feel more comfortable and confident about facing rather than ignoring the pain young people can regularly experience. This self knowledge – and in many cases the exoneration of prior experiences of guilt, shame, and anger – in turn strengthened their resolve to maintain a transformative teacher identity that is more inclusive than they previously had held. As one teacher candidate summarized, "School is not an accepting place for any deviation from societal norms, and young people suffer through their elementary and secondary school years without any intervention from adults." The notion of being an adult ally to youth and what happens when students are abandoned emotionally by their teachers and parents was a critical insight gained by this group of teacher education students.

Despite school mission statements that advertise a welcoming setting for all students, there is no question that teachers face forces aligned against the creation of inclusive learning communities and accompanying critical curricula. Within this audit culture it is imperative that teacher education programs take the lead to help prospective teachers see that alternatives do exist for inclusion within the often indeterminate bureaucratic language of the state. Teacher educators can reconstruct their own pedagogy to incorporate the language of academic outcomes in a manner that focuses on research-based approaches that tie inclusion to academic learning (e.g., Cohen & Lotan, 2004; Darling-Hammond, 1992; Landau, 2004; Learning First Alliance, 2001). In this way discourse around sexuality and gender identification can be reconstituted as a necessary foundation to the production of academic learning as well as "raise the status and alter thinking about young people's sexuality to explore it within the framework of citizenship, to consider specifically their sexual citizenship" (Aldred & David, 2007, p. 173). Through such approaches critical teacher educators, especially when acting collectively, can take steps to counter the hegemonic efforts to silence the provision of curricular strategies that deconstruct and defuse the naturalization of heteronormativity.

Based on this curricular experience, follow-up activities should be considered. To ground the new insights into their teacher

identities, preservice teachers need to be given structured opportunities to construct lesson plans in their disciplines that critically address gender identity and sexuality in developmentally appropriate ways. Teacher candidates also need instruction in conducting discussions related to gender identity and sexuality as well as strategies to respond appropriately and directly to homophobic and sexist discourse. Further research would be useful on the eventual pedagogical practices of graduates from programs that have deepened their critical pedagogy with significant attention to sexuality and gender in relation to the formation of teacher identities. A teacher education program that expands curricular attention to gender identity formation and issues of sexuality can help future teachers understand socio-emotional factors that affect their teacher identities and ideally contribute to a reduction in the psychic and often physical harm being experienced by children and youth who are required to attend public schools encapsulated in heteronormativity.

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