

Reflections on the Current State of Queer and Trans Education: A Call to Action for Literacy Educators and Researchers

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The world is in crisis. As much as I try to come up with a catchy opener for this piece, this is what comes back to my mind. In moments like this, I struggle with hopeless thoughts. I am a queer scholar focused on addressing queer and trans inclusion in preservice teacher education and K-16 classrooms, but when faced with repeated news stories about the daily increases in anti-queer and anti-trans legislation being introduced across the United States and across the world, I cannot help but question what difference I can make. I also write this as we see Russian troops invading Kyiv and hear reports of queer and trans Ukrainian civilians standing up to fight for a country that still perpetuates many anti-queer and anti-trans practices, but also affords more democratic privilege than its attacker. So, I aim to use this space to interrogate this moment, to reflect on how we can continue local level work towards queer and trans inclusive educational spaces in the face of increasingly complex and dangerous world events. I hope this essay serves as a reminder of how we, as humans, educators, and researchers, can make a meaningful difference in the spaces we occupy, even if we are not able to immediately stop the societal level assault on young queer and trans lives.

The State of Queer and Trans Issues in Education

The recent rise in queer-and-trans-antagonistic legislation moving through our country is more than cause for concern; it is a human rights crisis. Florida's recent "Don't Say Gay" bill, which essentially bans discussions about, and representations of, queer and trans topics in K-12 classrooms is one example of many. These legislative maneuvers are attempts to invalidate and silence queer and trans lives. As I write this, lawmakers and educational stakeholders in positions of power are actively working to create hostile school environments for young people, many of whom lack queer and trans affirming homes to return to at the end of their school day. We know queer and trans students are already at an increased risk for mental illness, school dropout, and experiencing hostility from

peers and teachers (GLSEN, 2019). At the same time, queer research, being historically situated in a white settler colonialist perspective, has failed to acknowledge and recognize how multi-layered experiences of oppression affect queer and trans people who hold other marginalized identities beyond gender and sexuality. These proposed laws exacerbate the risk and oppression queer and trans youth face in their educational and home settings.

Anti-queer and anti-trans legislation largely come from antagonistic viewpoints of parents and politicians. These stakeholders often claim that gender and sexuality do not belong in schools. What they are really saying is that they do not want anything other than cisheteronormative representations of gender and sexuality in school settings. When we look at the day-to-day practices of schools, we see gender and sexuality throughout teaching classrooms and spaces. Children are lined up or referred to according to assumed gender identities; storybooks on classroom shelves and in libraries include cisheteronormative representations of relationships and families; and most children's books re/produce gender normative assumptions about clothing, toys, careers. Literature that pushes back against these social norms are often challenged or banned by anti-queer and anti-trans educational stakeholders. Some argue that discussing queer and trans topics in classrooms is not appropriate for young people and should only be discussed with older students. These arguments come from the idea that gender and sexuality are synonymous with the act of sex. If this were true, the same argument could be made for all cisheteronormative stories, familial representations, and gender constructs that currently exist in early childhood classrooms. Hegemonic cisheteronormative discourse continues to resist seeing being cisgender or heterosexual as anything other than a default state. Educational stakeholders who are arguing for anti-queer and anti-trans legislation and policies are not saying gender and sexuality do not belong in classrooms, they are saying only cisheteronormative representations of gender and sexuality belong in classrooms.

The Role of Literacy Education

As literacy educators and scholars, these attempts to invalidate queer and trans lives and experiences is an issue in which we should be deeply involved. As we know, language serves as a foundation for social norms and practices. It is through language that we create realities and validate our individual lived experiences through collective communication and

knowledge (Butler, 1993/2011; Fairclough, 1989/2013). Queer and trans youth re/produce and re/constitute language that creates and affirms their relationships with sexuality and gender identity. When school fails to reflect their lived experiences, queer and trans youth seek spaces outside of school contexts to find community through micro-sanctuaries (Miller, 2019). Queer- and trans-antagonistic legislation pushes young people away from school-based literacies and widens the gap between in and out of school literacy practices.

Queer and trans inclusive and affirming literacy practices are not just for young people who are out or who identify with these identities. It is also for cisgender and heterosexual students who might not otherwise learn about the possibilities that exist beyond cisheteronormative ways of being. These literacy practices are for students who do not yet know what is beyond knowing, what their minds currently “cannot bear to know” (Britzman, 1995, p. 157) due to the limitations of the language and literacy environments in which they live. Through queer and trans inclusive practices, young people develop empathy and awareness of the complexities of sexuality and gender identity. Teachers who use inclusive and affirming language create paths of possibility and self-determination for the young people in their classrooms. These paths of deviation (Ahmed, 2006) move away from cisheteronormative assumptions to create space for indeterminate gender identities (Miller, 2020) and sexualities.

In a Scholars Speak Out Article from 2015, sj Miller stated, “The struggle for recognition is at the core of human identity” (2015b, p. 3). Miller described a recognition gap in which “misrecognition subverts the possibility to be made credible, legible or to be read and/or truly understood” (p. 3). This recognition gap still exists seven years later, but young queer and trans youth are pushing back against it and redefining possibilities for themselves through practices of queer participatory literacy. Queer participatory literacy involves a convergence of multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996), participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), and notions of queer and trans self-determined literacy practices largely informed by Miller (2015a, 2015b). Placing these three concepts of literacy pedagogy in dialogue with each other creates a space where queer and trans youth re/produce unique literacy practices, largely outside of traditional educational contexts, in which they find community, language, belonging, and affirmation. Sites of this literacy practice involve websites that have historically served as discursive spaces for creative and subversive

resistance against societal norms and assumptions. Examples include Tumblr, Reddit, and the current favorite, TikTok.

Findings Spaces for Change

This brings me back around to my initial goal of interrogating the ways we, as literacy educators and researchers, can make localized meaningful differences in opposition to the onslaught of queer- and trans-antagonistic events happening in our world right now. Our activism starts within the spaces we occupy. In classrooms, educators of all levels can educate themselves on the use of queer and trans affirming language. I recognize some educators are working in states which currently have, or are working towards, anti-queer and anti-trans legislation, often termed “No Promo Homo” laws (GLSEN, 2018). Queer pedagogy is not just about queer and trans inclusion; it is also about destabilizing what is assumed to be normal. While explicit use of queer and trans language can be affirming, many queer and trans youth are more focused on the normalization of gender and sexuality complexity than they are on further categorization that comes with labels. This means that educators in states which ban queer and trans inclusive curriculum and discourse can still find ways to subvert cisheteronormativity. One way to start this is by doing self-work on one’s own assumptions of gender and sexuality in others. We are socialized into assuming individuals are cisgender and heterosexual unless stated otherwise. By interrogating our own assumptions, we move away from cishetero categorization and towards gender and sexuality complexity. I recommend referring to Miller’s Queer Literacy Framework (2015a; 2016) as a starting point for disrupting the cisheteronormative assumptions we are socialized into re/producing as educators and researchers. Classroom educators can also work towards the practices of queer participatory literacy by deconstructing categorization in their classrooms and teaching digital literacy skills so young people can find and communicate effectively in online affinity networks.

Literacy researchers can affect change by talking about our work in spaces where we hold privilege. As we continue to address power and privilege in literacy-based research, we need to talk about this work in spaces where these topics are not being addressed or even considered. It takes years to produce published research, but we can see immediate impact through our daily practices and the ways in which we challenge our own assumptions and the assumptions of those around us. Researchers can also work to disrupt traditional notions of what counts as literacy and

recognize the body as a text that is both read and written in and through social discourses (e.g., Jones et al., 2021). All of this needs to be said with the caveat of safety. Many educators and literacy researchers hold marginalized identities that put them at increased risk. This is why I note that we need to do this work in the spaces where we hold privilege and in ways that simultaneously hold us accountable and maintain safety in the face of antagonistic hegemonic belief systems.

Critical Work and Critical Care

The weight of all of the things we wish to change in the world can be a heavy burden to bear. I am still personally working through how to handle the emotions that arise every time I am faced with another attack on queer and trans lives, as well as the lives of all humans. The feelings of burnout and hopelessness are real and valid. Taking the time to take care of ourselves as we do the work we do in the moment we currently live in is vital. As a white scholar who is read as able bodied and cisgender, I hold immense privilege in my public identities. As a queer person with a hidden disability, I also wrestle with the complex ways I experience my privilege as it is punctuated with oppressive discourses in my own research networks. My call to action is for each reader of this essay to consider how they are experiencing their own complexity of emotions, how they are showing up for queer and trans youth through their privileged identities, and how they are taking care for the parts of themselves that do not hold privilege. Critical work requires critical care of ourselves and our communities. We often get overwhelmed by our inability to change the world, but we forget to remember the many ways we can change the spaces within arms' reach, and how many young people will see us and be affirmed and inspired to spread their own arms and continue the ripple of change.

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