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# Tilling the Soil for LGBTQ Inclusive Policies: A Case Study of One School's Attempt to Bring Policy into Practice

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Tilling the Soil for LGBTQ Inclusive Policies: A Case Study of One School's Attempt to Bring  
Policy into Practice

by

Bethy Leonardi

B.A., Nicholls State University, 1996

M.A., University of Colorado Boulder, 2008

A thesis submitted to the  
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This thesis entitled:  
Tilling the Soil for LGBTQ Inclusive Policies: A Case Study of One School's Attempt to Bring  
Policy into Practice  
written by Bethy Leonardi  
has been approved for the School of Education  
University of Colorado Boulder

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Date

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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## Abstract

Leonardi, Bethy (Ph.D., Education, Educational Foundations, Policy and Practice)  
Tilling the Soil for LGBTQ Inclusive Policies: A Case Study of One School's Attempt to Bring  
Policy into Practice  
Dissertation directed by Professor Michele Moses

In this three-article dissertation, I attempt to contribute to an understanding of what it might look like to heal the harms caused by heteronormativity in school climates. I first present a theoretical piece, "Toward a Queered Democratic Framework: Moving Theory into Practice," in which, using post-structural and queer theories, my aim is to supplement ideas from participatory democratic theories, and to name and explore what I am calling a Queered Democratic Framework (QDF). Throughout this article, my intention is to establish a line of communication between participatory democratic theories and post-structural and queer theories. I make the case that these two theories, together, will advance our understandings of, and actions to eradicate, oppression. Together, they will move us beyond identity politics, beyond multicultural education and an additive model of inclusion, to more of a focus on habits of mind and heart that push on traditional conceptions of difference.

In the second article, "Tilling the Soil for LGBTQ Inclusive Policies: Learning Lessons from Desegregation to Cultivate Communities of Safety and Inclusivity," In this article, I argue that policies focused on equity cannot be expected, in and of themselves, to overcome social ills that are obstacles to their implementation (Wells et al, 1997). Drawing on lessons from *Brown v. Board*, I maintain that working for social change requires relying on all members of the school community: administration, teachers, parents and students (Wells et al, 1997). In this article, I share descriptions of interventions focused on gender and sexual diversity, illustrations of what happened in each, and reactions of all stakeholders. I offer this model as an example of what it

might look like to queer the implementation of a policy like FAIR and to *till the soil*—to cultivate community with the intention of healing harms caused by heteronormativity and to create safety and inclusivity.

In my final article, *Navigating the relationship between policy and practice: Competing discourses of fear and care in teachers' sense making about the FAIR Education Act*, I take a step closer in, and spend time focusing on teachers. I examine the relationship between large-scale social discourses and local, school discourses as it plays out in their conversations about gender and sexuality. Grounded in concepts of discourse, silence and power, discursive theories of gender and sexuality are central (e.g. Foucault, Hall, Butler) to this piece. I examine what happens in professional development settings when teachers are given opportunities to make sense of their roles in attending to topics of gender and sexual diversity, through conversations and dialogue, specifically in the context of the passage of FAIR. I argue that examining this relationship provides key insights into the ways teachers make sense of equity-focused policies that are meant to shift sociopolitical paradigms, and their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of such policies.

## Acknowledgements

I want to first thank the teachers and staff at Hope Academy, for inviting me into their community. Allowing me to document this process took a lot of courage and trust. I also want to thank them for the ways in which they took risks, were willing to “not know” but to try anyway, and were committed to working together to create a middle school where students felt seen, heard, and respected. I am truly inspired by the work that they have done to make Hope a special space. I also want to thank my advisor, *Michele Moses*, for encouraging me to apply to this program; I am so grateful to have had this opportunity and I owe it to you. I never imagined achieving this level of education and your belief in me changed my life. I could not have asked for a better mentor through this process and will be forever grateful for your wisdom, compassion, friendship, and kindness. I’d also like to thank my co-chair, *Margaret Eisenhart*—mainly for your patience with me, but also for your continued willingness to push me as a scholar. Your expertise throughout this process has been invaluable. To the rest of the best possible committee ever-- thank you: *Elizabeth Dutro*, for encouraging me to keep my passion—and to *feel* my way through this work; *Ken Howe*, for poking holes in my theoretical musings and for helping me fill them up; and *Liz Meyer*, for making space for me and for inspiring me to do this important work.

I’d also like to thank my incredible community of friends—who have listened to countless hours of academic speak throughout my time in this program and who have continued to push me—head and heart—to stay grounded in this work. I’d like to thank my partner, *Sara Staley*, who talked with me through many of the ideas presented in this dissertation, who had patience with my on-going processing and idea generating, and who didn’t give me a hard time about wearing the same sweatpants almost every day for the past year. Lastly, I’d like to thank

my parents, *Margaret and A.J. Leonardi*. Your support during this program was critical to my success, but it's much more than that. You taught me to work hard, to appreciate the people and opportunities in my life, to not take anything for granted, and to have integrity in all that I do. Throughout this program, these lessons were ones that I lived by. I am so proud to be your kid.

This dissertation is dedicated to the students for whom school was not a safe, inclusive space and who took their young lives as a result. We failed you.

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<sup>1</sup> As partial requirement of my area of focus in the School of Education: Educational Foundations, Policy and Practice, and for defending this dissertation, this article was submitted to Teachers College Record, February, 2014. It is presented in the required format for TCR.

## Introduction

In 2008, the year before I started graduate school, I was living in Los Angeles. Every Sunday morning, I'd sit on my stoop and read the *LA Times*. As a middle school teacher at the time, my students were on my mind constantly; I worked at a small progressive school, Roots Community School, where I taught English, math and history, and where I learned that if I wanted to continue to grow as a person, I needed to hang out more with middle school students. They were passionate, innocent, and yet very wise; they had a sense of justice and of trust in the world that seems difficult to maintain sometimes. They were also action oriented; instead of complaining about what was wrong with the ways things were, they had plans to fix everything. I loved this about them. When someone was treated unfairly, we had class meetings; they talked to one another and they listened. The culture at Roots was like one I had never experienced. Hearing adults talk about middle school as “the worst time of their lives” is painful—especially considering what kids in middle school are capable of, and who they are capable of holding us accountable to be.

So, naturally, when I saw a headline, from February 15, 2008, that read “*Oxnard school shooting called a hate crime: 14-year-old is charged in shooting of Oxnard classmate,*” I felt my heart drop into my gut. Images of my students flew through my head as if I had to be sure that they were all accounted for, that they were safe. I read on,

Ventura County prosecutors charged a 14-year-old boy with the shooting death of a classmate Thursday and said the killing in an Oxnard classroom was a premeditated hate crime.

Senior Deputy Dist. Atty. Maeve Fox declined to discuss a motive in the shooting or why prosecutors added the special allegation of a hate crime against Brandon McInerney, who was charged as an adult.

But classmates of the slain boy, Lawrence King, said he recently had started to wear makeup and jewelry and had proclaimed himself gay. Several students said King and a group of boys, including the defendant, had a verbal confrontation concerning King's sexual orientation a day before the killing. (Saillant & Covarrubias, 2008)

As a teacher who identifies as queer, feelings and thoughts twisted themselves around my body. I felt sick. I felt afraid. I felt disappointed, confused. And I felt angry—but not necessarily with Brandon McInerney, and not necessarily with *that* school, *that* community, *those* teachers. Looking for people to blame in situations that are incomprehensible and hard to swallow is both a tempting and useless strategy, I've found.

I had to really sit with this. *Could this happen... could some form of this happen, in my classroom? How many kids were sitting, feelings and thoughts twisted, in my own class?* At this point in my career, I was out to my students and to the school community-at-large, but I wasn't really being intentional about incorporating gender and sexual diversity into my pedagogy on a regular basis. I prided myself on teaching for social justice—but what that meant, to me, was teaching a mostly white study body, of very mixed income, about racism—and about how racism was functioning throughout systems and about being conscious of the ways in which we were all perpetuating inequities based on race.

I talked to my students on the following Monday about Lawrence King, about this story;

we all cried, in fact. In the weeks to come, when in the media the story was unfolding, we talked a lot about him—as if we knew him. One question in a series of articles that gave me pause, that has stuck with me, and that has guided my research is one asked by Jay Smith, executive director of the Ventura County Rainbow Alliance, a nonprofit group that advocates for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender rights. He said: "The big question I have is: Was the school equipped to have a student like Larry in attendance?" While we talked a lot about diversity, about thinking well of people, about being conscious and intentional about historical and cultural inequity and while there were few bullying incidents at my school, the answer to this question, for me, was no, probably not. We never made the conversation about gender and sexuality explicit. For a "student like Larry" to be safe and affirmed at my school, or at any school, a lot had to change with respect to the ways that we build school spaces. Even as a queer person who grew up, and still identifies, outside of the gender binary, I admit that it takes a lot of consciousness to recognize the destructive ways that we do school, how we organize our classrooms, how we talk to our students, what kinds of expectations we have of, for example, for boys and girls. Like "smog in the air" (Tatum, 1997), heteronormativity and its caustic counterpart, homophobia, are alive and well in society, and of course, in our schools (Blackburn & Smith, 2010)-- given the longstanding relationship between schools and society. For schools to be "equipped" for students like Larry, attention needed to be on the relationship between the two.

The horror of Larry King's death, one might think, would wake us up a bit, would encourage a caring society to investigate and attend to the ways that schools might not be "equipped" to hold and care for students who break the socially constructed laws in these heteronormative spaces. In the years since King's murder, thirty plus, that we know of, students have taken their own young lives, citing their school experiences as central to their reasoning. To

me, this is unacceptable, to say the very least. The urgency that I felt, and still feel, around this issue was becoming increasingly difficult to temper. But I felt stifled. If these tragedies were a result of the dangerous ways that heteronormativity functions both in schools and in society, how could I really do anything? This was bigger than me.

In the summer of 2012, I became aware of both the FAIR Education Act and of Seth's Law, two pieces of CA legislation meant to make schools safer for LGBTQ students. With a Masters in Educational Foundations, Policy and Practice, and as a PhD candidate with the same focus, I am very interested in examining the relationship between education, policy, and history, as well as how this relationship affects school practices. These policies, I thought, were good first steps to disrupting heteronormativity, but I wondered how they would be received and if they, especially FAIR, would survive. Around this same time, my friend, colleague, and former boss, Laurie, who was the principal at Roots Community School when I was there, accepted a position as the founding principal of Hope Academy, a charter school meant to serve 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders. I had long wished that she would find herself in a public school, where the community she was known to create could be shared with a larger number of students. Laurie is like no other leader, really. She knows every student by name; she knows what they struggle with, what brings them joy. She laughs and has fun with them; she listens to them. She also pushes them to be better people. She has been known to do the same with her staff.

When it came to FAIR, I recognized that considering the relationship between school and society meant recognizing that schools might have a difficult time in its implementation. I wondered how comfortable teachers would be, how prepared they felt, how kids would react when a historically marginalized group, such as those who identify as LGBTQ, became

intelligible in the heteronormative spaces that are our schools. And I thought that if FAIR had a chance to thrive in any environment—it would be this one. After just a couple of conversations with Laurie, we settled on a plan and I made my first trip out to meet Hope’s staff community in August of 2012.

The articles presented as part of this dissertation represent my interest in the social foundations of education, policy, and practice, as well as theories that are meant to guide both policy and practice. In the three articles that follow, I attempt to contribute to an understanding of what it might look like to heal the harms caused by heteronormativity in school climates. I first present a theoretical piece, in which, using post-structural and queer theories, my aim is to supplement ideas from participatory democratic theories, and to name and explore what I am calling a Queered Democratic Framework (QDF). Throughout this article, my intention is to establish a line of communication between participatory democratic theories and post-structural and queer theories. The QDF has three specific strands. The first is its conception of identity as “a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (Jagose, 1996), rather than as stable or essential, and as group membership a political necessity, yet as only partial in its representation of who we are all (becoming). The second is intended to add principled strength to queer and post-structural theories with its focus on concepts central to democratic education: justice, fairness and equality, and the last strand of the QDF is its emphasis on the relationship between theory, policy, and practice and its attention to policy assumptions as they play out in practice. I ultimately make the case that these two theories, together, will advance our understandings of, and actions to eradicate, oppression. Together, they will move us beyond identity politics, beyond multicultural education and an additive model of inclusion, to more of a focus on habits of mind and heart that push on traditional conceptions of difference.

In the second article, “Tilling the Soil for LGBTQ Inclusive Policies: Learning Lessons from Desegregation to Cultivate Communities of Safety and Inclusivity,” I focus on FAIR as a policy consistent with democratic ideals, but make the case that democratic policies may not be enough to shift a sociopolitical paradigm, and indeed, might fail if the spaces in which they are to be implemented are not safe for their arrival. I argue that policies focused on equity cannot be expected, in and of themselves, to overcome social ills that are obstacles to their implementation (Wells et al, 1997). Drawing on lessons from *Brown v. Board*, I maintain that working for social change requires relying on all members of the school community: administration, teachers, parents and students (Wells et al, 1997). I first share insights from desegregation literature in an effort to make important connections between the decision of *Brown* and the passage of FAIR. I then share descriptions of interventions focused on gender and sexual diversity, illustrations of what happened in each, and reactions of all stakeholders. These include focused conversations and professional development with teachers, student interventions, and one parent presentation focused on FAIR, safety and school culture. I offer this model as an example of what it might look like to queer the implementation of a policy like FAIR and to *till the soil*—to cultivate community with the intention of healing harms caused by heteronormativity and to create safety and inclusivity.

In my final article, I take a step closer in, and spend time focusing on teachers. I examine the relationship between large-scale social discourses and local, school discourses as it plays out in their conversations about gender and sexuality. Grounded in concepts of discourse, silence and power, discursive theories of gender and sexuality are central (e.g. Foucault, Hall, Butler) to this piece. I examine what happens in professional development settings when teachers are given opportunities to make sense of their roles in attending to topics of gender and sexual diversity,

through conversations and dialogue, specifically in the context of the passage of FAIR. I argue that examining this relationship provides key insights into the ways teachers make sense of equity-focused policies that are meant to shift sociopolitical paradigms, and their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of such policies.

My hope is that the articles that I share here will contribute to the growing literature on how to make schools safe and affirming for all students, specifically those who identify or who are perceived to be LGBTQ.

## **Toward a queered democratic framework: Moving theory into practice**

### **Introduction**

Traditional liberal theories of justice are often associated with inadequate interpretations of educational equality, particularly related to equality of educational opportunity, that serve to perpetuate the status quo (Howe, 1997). Historically insensitive to the ways in which certain group membership (i.e., women, people of color, people who identify as LGBTQ) has affected educational opportunities, more traditional liberal theories have been complicit in legitimating domination (Howe, 1997). There are, however, liberal democratic theorists who rightly demand a more complex view of equality, suggesting that equality be defined, in part, by recognizing that to have and make use of opportunities, consideration must be given to the interaction between individuals and the social conditions in which they exist to render educational opportunities “worth wanting” (Howe, 1997, p. 69). Further, they recognize a participatory model, which values the “need to question and negotiate what the educational standards and practices worth wanting should be” (Howe, 1993, p. 334 ) Necessary to this model is valuing the voices that have historically been left out of these conversations-- substantively or *internally*, so as to “denormalize the way institutions formulate their rules by revealing the plural circumstances and needs that exist, or ought to exist, within them” (Young, 1990, p. 134). The project that I seek to undertake here has two distinct purposes. One is to challenge democratic theorists whose work is of great value to the project of equality, to be more nuanced in their use of group membership, specifically as it relates to gender and sexual diversity. Theorists are often quick to mention lists (e.g., gender, race, social class, sexuality) in discussions of equality and justice. As such my aim herein is twofold: first, to urge these theorists to be more careful in considering the nuances of

how these categories not only fail to capture the intersections and margins, but how these oversights matter to people's lived experiences; and, with this in mind, my second purpose is to call attention to the ways in which democratic policies are applied and are taken up in practice.

Participatory interpretations of democratic theory, as exemplified by Dewey (1916; 1938), Howe (1992, 1993, 1997), Moses (2001), Young (1990) and Kymlicka (1991), variously rely on central concepts of autonomy, self-determination, recognition, nonoppression, and social contexts of choice in arguments for equality of educational opportunities. While arguments made in participatory democratic frameworks are critical to conceptualizing ideas of equality, they don't go far enough with their unpacking of these concepts if they are to meaningfully support equality of educational opportunities in practice. Essential to my argument is the way in which democratic theorists conceptualize identity and how this conceptualization affects not only how these central concepts are understood, but also subsequent policies that aim to create equal educational opportunities and that rely on these concepts. Similar to postmodern/post-structural and queer theories (e.g., Butler, Kumashiro, Britzman), participatory democratic theorists recognize, for example, that "identities aren't rigidly fixed and that prescribing a particular voice for members of marginalized groups can be condescending, stereotyping, and oppressive" (Howe, 1998, p. 18); yet, their recognition of this reality, it seems, remains at the level of political theory. They don't seem to consider how these important political concepts, and associated democratic policies, are received and experienced on the ground. Given, however, democratic theorists' focus on the relational aspect of identity, as well as the ways in which they are concerned with contexts of choice, with the interaction between subject and social context, I have reason to believe that establishing a line of communication here, between democratic and

postmodern/post-structural and queer theories, might move us, together, in an important direction.

Using essential insights from postmodern/post-structural and queer theories, I supplement ideas from participatory democratic theories, as well as name and explore what I am calling a Queered Democratic Framework (QDF). The QDF has three specific strands. The first is its conception of identity as “a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (Jagose, 1996), rather than as stable or essential; further the QDF considers group membership a political necessity, yet acknowledges it as only partial in its representation of who we are all (becoming). The second is intended to add principled strength to postmodern/post-structural and queer theories with its focus on concepts central to democratic education: justice, fairness and equality. The last strand of the QDF is its emphasis on the relationship between theory, policy, and practice and its attention to policy assumptions as they play out in practice. This strand of the QDF is where the rubber hits the road; it is where important democratic principles and a queered conception of identity meet through the implementation of policy. Throughout this article, my intention, again, is to establish a line of communication between participatory democratic theories and postmodern/post-structural and queer theories, noting key overlaps and complicating democratic theory<sup>2</sup> to make successful and equitable application to education policy more viable.

In this article, then, I explore the three strands of the QDF by first developing a conceptualization of identity heavily influenced by postmodern/post-structural and queer theorists. I make the case that if we are to move toward an education that ultimately changes

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<sup>2</sup> Throughout the rest of this article, unless otherwise noted, when I refer to democratic theory, I am referring to the conceptions put forward by specified theorists, specifically, Dewey (1916; 1938), Howe (1997), Moses (2001), Young (1990, 2000) and Kymlicka (1991).

schools and society (Kumisharo, 2001), the ways in which identity is conceptualized by postmodern/post-structural and queer theorists will likely move our education system closer to following through on promises of equality of educational opportunity and the principles of justice, fairness and equality which are central to democratic theory. Second, I explain these principles, along with related concepts, such as autonomy, self-determination, recognition, nonoppression, and favorable social contexts of choice, and how they function in the QDF. I ultimately make the case that these theories, together, will advance our understandings of, and actions to eradicate, oppression. Together, they will move us beyond identity politics, beyond multicultural education and the desire for an additive model of inclusion, to more of a focus on habits of mind and heart that push on traditional conceptions of difference. To contextualize this theory, and to explicate strand three of the QDF, I turn my attention to the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful Education Act (FAIR). FAIR, passed in California on April 14, 2011, prohibits adoption of discriminatory materials and amends the Education Code to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Americans, people with disabilities, and Pacific Islanders in the social sciences curriculum. I use this policy, and its focus on mere curricular inclusion, as one whose implementation might benefit from being informed explicitly by the QDF. My intention is to show how this framework can be applied practically, in order to help this policy move into practice meaningfully and with a chance for success.

## **A Queered Democratic Framework**

### **Strand 1: Identity and Group Membership**

### **Identity:**<sup>3</sup>

To prescribe an exclusive identification for a multiply constituted subject, as every subject is, is to enforce a reduction and a paralysis.... And here it is not simply a matter of honoring the subject as a plurality of identifications, for these identifications are invariably imbricated in one another, the vehicle for one another; a gender identification can be made in order to repudiate or participate in a race identification; what counts as ‘ethnicity’ frames and eroticizes sexuality or can itself be a sexual marking. This implies that it is not a matter of relating race and sexuality and gender, as if they were fully separable axes of power; the pluralist separation of these terms as ‘categories’ or indeed as ‘positions’ is itself based on exclusionary operations that attribute a false uniformity to them and that serve the regulatory aims of the liberal state. And when they are considered analytically discrete, the practical consequence is a continual enumeration, a multiplication that produces an ever-expanding list that effectively separates that which it purports to connect, or that seeks to connect through an enumeration which cannot consider crossroads, in Gloria Anzaldua’s sense, where these categories converge, a crossroads that is not a subject, but, rather, the unfulfilled demand to rework convergent signifiers in and through each other. (Butler, 1993, p. 116-117)

Queering the democratic framework requires that ideas of “identity” or “identities” be informed by postmodern/post-structural and queer theories notions of who were are becoming. I begin this explanation of identity recognizing that the concept itself is difficult to define, even in a more generous space of attempting to move beyond categories and fixed understandings. Several important points are integral to the conceptualization of identity that I employ. First, social and

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<sup>3</sup> My intention in this article is not to add theoretical insight to notions of identity, but to situate myself among the queer and post- theorists and to use their ideas of identity/identification as central to the QDF.

personal identities are not fixed or self-contained (Giroux, 1993); they are relational, socially constructed, and expressions and recognition of identity are contingent on time and place (Hall, 1990). Second, identity construction is a process that is heavily influenced by history and social context. Third, identities are discursively produced; that is, identity formation and social practices are a function of, and mediated by, discourse and discursive practices (Foucault, 1977, 1998). Lastly, categories (e.g., categories based on race, sexual orientation, gender) are socially constructed through a process of identification by self and others and often ignore multiplicities and intersections inherent to who we are (Butler, 1999; Kumashiro, 1991); they are political, and are situated in a web of power (Foucault, 1977, 1998; Butler, 1990).

Central to the QDF is that the concept of identity does not represent a “stable core of the self” that evolves, unchanged, and is “identical to itself across time” (Hall, 2000, p. 17). It “accepts that identities are never unified and... [are] increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across difference, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions,” are “subject to radical historicization” and are continuously changing and transforming (Hall, p. 17). Identity construction, then, is a process; “it is both and simultaneously a being and a becoming, a positioning and a re-positioning, the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall, 1989, p. 70). In this process of identity construction, all subjects are situated in relation to the social, to others and to particular norms (Butler, 2005). As such, we are all recognized as degrees of normative or deviant depending on assumptions that are operating in particular-- and always consequential, ways (Dutro, 2013, email exchange). It follows then, that how and when people experience both social and institutional forms of oppression differs in different contexts (Kumashiro, 2001).

Much of how we are recognized, what brings us into existence, is discourse-- language and practice that constructs topics, objects, and categories of our knowledge (Foucault, 1977). Butler (1993) contends that “the discursive condition of social recognition *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on the subject, but forms the subject” (p. 18). Because identities are shaped through and as a result of discourse, and not separate from it, it is critical to acknowledge that their production and meaning are specific to both historical and institutional sites and that “they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power” (Hall, 1990, p.17). Since discourse has the power to “produce that which it names” (Butler, 1993, p. 17). It also has the power to position certain identities as Other; for any identity to have meaning, it must be defined in opposition to that which it is not (Butler, 1993; Kumashiro, 2002). The power of discourse to name certain groups in opposition to other groups (i.e. black, white; gay, straight), to create categories of existence, mistakenly ignores the multiplicity of identities, the inherent intersections that exists within all of us, and instead produces a focus on difference, and on exclusion (Hall, 1990).

The QDF appreciates ways in which categories of identity are both constraining and enabling. The politicizing of identity makes it “politically necessary” to lay claim to terms that have “laid their claim on us prior to our full knowing” (Butler 1993, p. 20). These political categories, however, fail to capture the “passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, and implicate us in lives that are not our own, sometimes fatally, irreversibly” (Butler, 2004b, p. 20). To recognize the complexity of who we all are and who we continue to become, these categories must be continuously subject to scrutiny; there must be a willingness to not know their future, an ongoing questioning of their limits (Butler, 2004b, p. 38). This is especially true when we consider the essentializing nature of the concepts of “social” and “cultural” identities and the (mis)understanding that those with

shared histories or experiences have common, unified struggles, successes, and voices (Hall, 1990; Butler, 1990, 1993; Kumashiro, 2001). Identity categories-- unquestioned, taken for granted as fixed or as natural, or even as politically necessary without continued critique, as seems to be the case for democratic theorists, situate all of us in the social matrix and hierarchy; they are “socially created labels used to organize people into groups to meet the needs of various moral, social and even economic agendas” (Alexander, 2008, p. 43). Butler (1999) argues that while these categories can be limiting, even dangerous, and while they need to be scrutinized and reworked, they continue to be necessary for survival. Not only do identity categories have legal and political implications, they also signify a level of stability that is critical to the project of realizing a “livable life” (Butler, 2004b). This is similar to what participatory democratic theorists have to say, but with a crucial difference. Howe (1998), for example, appreciates concerns about the naming of Others and agrees that subjectivities must be considered when working toward more equitable and democratic schools and society. Further, he suggests that applying political principles, such as justice and equality, to groups that have been identified as oppressed, is necessary in order to end oppression. He doesn’t, however, call for the scrutinizing and reworking of these categories, which is a key component of the QDF, and which I believe will justly get at the project of ending oppression in all of its forms.

### **Group Membership: A (for now) political necessity**

“Identity politics” often seem to dominate the political landscape in this country, especially as related to education policy—and why wouldn’t it? Categories of identity are “historical productions” (Carlson, 1999, p. 97), created and maintained by perfect storms of “othering,” stigmatization, and power. These storms have been relentless and have, naturally, incited responses, reactions, retaliation and even retribution—all in the name of the categories to

which certain identities were assigned, and certain traits attributed. So, over time, groups of people have been treated unfairly and unjustly—second-guessed, suspected, mistrusted, underestimated, or worse, criminalized, enslaved, beaten, killed. There remains a need to counteract this marginalization; social movements based on common oppressions, connected to identity, have been essential to certain groups gaining rights—equal rights under the law, as well as more “social” equality through finding a common voice to challenge harmful stereotypes (Carlson, 1998). Through these movements, groups have been able to “counter their historic disempowerment and cultural marginalization” and by individuals joining together to do so, by identifying with intention and identifying with “values, lifestyles, and social projects of identity groups, identity politics has provided... the self with an identity ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), a community of common language and meaning that is also a cultural home—something inhabited and lived” (Carlson, p. 93).

Within the QDF, categories matter; to pretend that they don’t is to ignore the history that created them, that continues to be the cause of discrimination, oppression, and unequal treatment in this country and throughout the world, and has contributed to the solidarity that “members” of these groups often feel or seek. Democratic theorists (e.g. Kymlicka, 1991; Howe, 1997; Young, 1990; Moses, 2001) agree that inviting voices of historically marginalized groups to participate in politics, “provid[ing] mechanisms for the effective representation and recognition of [their] distinct voices” (Young, p. 128) and “treat[ing] [them] as equals” (Kymlicka, 1991), are all critical to right the wrongs done throughout history, and still today, with respect to groups that have been disadvantaged and/or oppressed. This is an important theoretical step; in the world as it is, the QDF specifies that there is a need to identify oppressed groups and to recognize the ways in which, over time, these groups have been disadvantaged by systems and normative

social practices. However, this step may only get us so far. The problem that I see, and that postmodern/post-structural and queer theorists might also see, is that there is no “distinct voice” for a particular group of people—for African Americans, for the LGBTQ community, for women—or for straight, white men (an identity from which no one would ever seek to hear a “distinct voice”). While inviting, for example, the “LGBTQ community” to the table, in some ways, might contribute to the inclusion necessary to end oppression in some of its forms, it doesn’t account for the important nuances that exist within this very community (e.g., while LGB members of “the community” may be fighting for marriage rights, T and Q members may privilege rights to healthcare, specifically rights related to recognition of how they may identify and to their safe and affordable transitions). These categories do not do justice to the complexity of who people are; furthermore, people may not even identify with certain ascribed categories as primary, as they are defined from the outside in. How can we move forward with a project of equality and also recognize that there needs to be a tacking back and forth between the categories that have historically shaped our understandings of people and the limits that these categories have in creating a different society, one that is focused on leveling oppression in all of its forms?

This puts us into what Butler (2006) names as “an interesting political predicament” (p. 24); similarly, Young (2000) calls this a “dilemma of difference” (p. 389). Most of the time, “when we hear about ‘rights,’ we understand them as pertaining to individuals; yet, when we argue for protection against discrimination, we argue as a group or class” (Butler, 2006, p. 24). Young (2000) argues that for political theory, “the relations that matter the most are structural relations of hierarchy and inequality” (p. 389); these structural relations are understood along identity lines—along groups. Young (2000) maintains, “social structures are the relatively permanent constraints and enablements that condition people’s actions and possibilities in

relation to others and in relation to the natural and built environment” (p. 390). Here is where, in my mind, Young gives up too easily. Perhaps this is where democratic theorists need a little nudge. The language of oppressed groups, the lists of “race, gender, social class, sexuality...” imply that we are “bounded beings, distinct, recognizable, delineated, subjects before the law, a community defined by some shared features” (p. 24). Butler (2006), as well as Young (2000), argues that we need this language to secure rights and protections, though Butler goes further to warn against using how we are seen in a legal sense to capture all of what we are about, a warning that may be relevant to democratic theory. Not questioning the limits of these categories may prevent the leveling of oppression in all of its forms. While democratic theorists (e.g., Howe, Young, Moses) call attention to theoretical tensions with respect to identity and group membership, to the complicated nature of who we are, they continue to rely on fixed categories in arguments related to policy. As I’ve pointed out throughout this article, I agree with democratic theorists in their focus on rights of groups that have been historically marginalized. The QDF relies on the need to take action against group oppression in the world as it is; however, it also relies on complicating group identities, particularly in the implementation of democratic policies, for the world as it could someday be.

Central to democratic theory is its interpretation of equality; Kymlicka (1991) maintains that in order for people to have a chance at the “primary good”<sup>4</sup> of self-respect, society must make it possible for them to effectively “express their cultural and gendered identities in society’s institutions” (cited in Howe, 1997, p. 31). Self-respect is contingent upon “maintaining one’s group identity, and having what flows from it respected and taken seriously” (Howe, p. 31). Kymlicka (1991) further explains that treating people equally is “incompatible with defining people in terms of roles they did not shape or endorse” (p. 89). These ideas, first that self-respect

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<sup>4</sup> Kymlicka thinks of primary goods in the Rawlsian (1971) tradition.

hinges upon individuals maintaining their “group identities” and second, that in order for people to be treated equally, we must not define them from the outside, seem to contradict one another. To me, however, they just expose the complicated nature of identity politics and provide justification for why we have to continue to push on what we mean by “identity.” Identity is shaped and endorsed in quite complex ways and there is a certain reduction of who we are as complex beings that identity categories engender. There is also what Carlson (1995) calls a “reduction of individuals to one axis of identity that washes out all other differences” (p. 95). Identity categories often ignore “intersectionality,”<sup>5</sup> and even when intersections are considered, this thinking problematically assumes that we are puzzle pieces that fit together neatly, and that each “identity” (i.e. gay, African American, able-bodied) contributes the same weight. Someone who identifies as a gay, African American, working class and male may, in a socially and politically progressive community, be treated, both socially and politically, differently than this same person in a more conservative community.

Butler (2004) argues for a focus on human rights, and on how those rights do and do not work for particular groups, maintaining that we must be part of a “critical democratic project,” in which there is a “double path in politics” (p. 37). Centralizing identity categories related to gender and sexuality, Butler says,

...we must use the language [of categories] to assert an entitlement to conditions of life in ways that affirm the constitutive role of sexuality and gender in political life, and we must also subject our very categories to critical scrutiny. We must find out the limits of their inclusivity and translatability, the presuppositions they include, the ways in which they must be expanded, destroyed, reworked both to encompass and open up what it is to be human and gendered. (p. 37)

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<sup>5</sup> Scholars argue that intersectionality, too, should be troubled (i.e. Kumashiro, 2001; Spade, 2011).

Kumashiro (2001) further explains the “paradoxes” of identity, noting that while identity categories may empower us, they often serve to regulate us, strengthen binaries of “us” and “them,” and disregard not only the historical complexities of certain groups, but also the ways in which the cultures of these groups, be these related to sexuality, gender, race/ ethnicity, have “intersected, overlapped, or else came sharply into conflict” (Powell, 1999, p. 2 in Kumashiro, p. 5). Standards for “full group membership” (Cohen 1996, p. 363 in Kumisharo, p. 5) are often oppressive and alienating to some group members, often members who are the least advantaged with respect to other “groups” to which they belong. This is consistent with Dean Spade’s (2011) important concept of “trickle-up social justice,” the idea that social justice doesn’t trickle down, from those who are the most advantaged in a particular group (i.e. high-income, gay, white, male communities) to those least advantaged (i.e., low-income gay, white male communities) and his ideas around the most vulnerable of the vulnerable (of certain “groups”) being the most affected by inequity. This is something that, while acknowledged by some democratic theorists (e.g., Rawls, 1999) does not seem to be given enough attention when evaluating the implications of particular “group identities” as they play out on the ground. This attention would require a willingness to consider Butler’s (2004) idea of “double path in politics” as necessary and as viable; this would also require effort to move beyond philosophical and theoretical ideals and to consider how these play out on the ground, and how they affect the lived experiences of people they are meant to serve.

What are the boundaries of identities? What does it mean for people to be able to express their “cultural and gendered identities in society’s institutions” (Howe, 1997), especially given that “cultures are constantly changing, making it impossible to pinpoint the ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ culture of

any group” (Hall, 1990 in Kumashiro, p. 8). How, then, are these identities defined? Is there space to hold more than the categories that are ready-made, that have been institutionalized? Both democratic and postmodern/ post-structural, and queer theorists contend that we need these categories to fight against inequality and oppression; democratic theorists, however, are concerned that in a postmodern “radical deconstruction of group identity... all that remains are decentered, radically unstable individuals” (Howe, 2003, p. 75). This seems to be a real point of contention, but I don’t think it needs to be; instead, I think this may call for democratic theorists to, perhaps, come out of the closet, so to speak. If, as I have explained, both democratic and post-theories agree that identity is complicated, that its categories are inherently problematic, then why is it that deconstructing group identity, even as a thought experiment, is so difficult to entertain? Didn’t Dewey (1916) underscore the idea that “the self is not something ready-made, but something that is in continuous formation through choice of action”? Didn’t he disagree with the idea of an authentic self, that in this “continuous formation,” what we are becoming is dependent upon what we do in our lives (Greene, 1978)? Doesn’t this support the notion that we are “forever in process, forever growing and reconstructing [our] experiences... forever in pursuit of [our]selves”? In denying the “instability” of who we are, aren’t we also rejecting possibility (Greene, 1978, p. 29)? Dewey (1916) also said that “[d]emocracy must be born anew in every generation” (p. 139). He warned that

Failure to examine the conceptual structures and frames of reference which are unconsciously implicated in even the seemingly most innocent factual inquiries is the single greatest defect that can be found in any field of inquiry. (1938, p. 505)

What does this mean right now? Is there space to push on what it is that we know, of people and the systems of which we are all a part? Is there space to do this in the ways that we educate our youth? What would this look like in schools? Those advocating for multicultural education, which

many democratic theorists do (e.g., Howe, 1992; Moses, 2001) more identity-based curriculum and pedagogy, argue via democratic purposes and ideals that “mere inclusion or notable presence of new voices and groups will alter existing and even spawn new social structures” (Kopelson, 2002, p. 19). postmodern/post-structural and queer theories challenge this view, and us as educators and researchers, to resist the structures that are available, the “regulatory mechanisms of the dominant culture” (Carlson, 1998, p. 97), as well as to resist new structures that might be “spawned” and be equally oppressive, only to different “groups.” These theories aim to expose the often hidden power dynamics that create and control destructive binaries that are central to identity development and to expose and deconstruct these binaries (Carlson, 1998). Influenced by identity politics, multicultural education advocates that students learn about and respect “different” groups, reinforcing inequalities by focusing on the “Other” (Carlson, 1998). There is rarely attention, through a multicultural curriculum, to these groups as historical productions, categories that have long served to regulate and sustain inequality (Carlson, 1998). In the QDF, reconceptualizing identity requires that we use these labels, these political identities, as starting points to work against oppressive forces that exist, to argue for justice and equality, but that we continue to acknowledge that “our identities are constantly being fixed and unfixed, centered and in flux” (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 6). This requires that, as we consider ideas of equality and justice, we interrogate, disrupt, and reimagine oppressive social, political, and school contexts, the norms and practices therein, and ultimately that we maximize possibilities for lives to be livable (Butler, 2004). This is where the line of communication needs to be established with more intention, where the call for a “double path in politics makes sense,” but it also where I believe that attention to the implementation of policies that aim to address historically marginalized groups, especially in schools, needs to be a focus.

## **Strand 2: Equality/ Fairness and Justice: Central principles of democracy and how they land in a queered space**

Adding principled strength to postmodern/post-structural and queer theories, the QDF is grounded in democratic theory and the principle of equality of educational opportunity. The QDF protects theoretical principles of equality, fairness, and justice, which, in the process of policy implementation, often remain as abstract philosophical principles (Howe, 1992) that are left to stumble through on their own, get lost, or even die out; that is to say, the QDF protects these principles by exploring how they play out in schools through related queered conceptions of autonomy, self-determination, recognition, nonoppression, and social contexts of choice (Moses, 2002; Howe, 1992, 1993, 1997, 1998; Kymlicka, 1991) in arguments for equality of educational opportunities.

### **Equality of educational opportunities and choices that are “worth wanting”**

Our system of public education is built on a commitment to providing all students with equal educational opportunities<sup>6</sup>. Not attending, however, to the different ways that students experience school as a result of how *who they are* interacts with *where they are*, the collision of identity and school culture often prevents us from making good on this promise. Paying attention to this important truth, the QDF is grounded in Howe’s (1997) radical liberal theory of democracy, justice, and schooling, which considers justice, democracy, and equality so tightly

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<sup>6</sup> Much of this section comes from: Leonardi, B. & Saenz, L. (in press). “Conceptualizing Safety from the Inside Out: Heteronormative Spaces and Their Effects on Students’ Sense of Self” in Carlson, D. & Meyer, E. (eds.) *Gender and Sexualities in Education: A Handbook*. Peter Lang: New York, NY.

interwoven that “it is impossible to have any of them without all” (Cochran-Smith, 2008, p. 10). Translating this theory into practice requires that students have equal educational opportunities. While the concept of equality of educational opportunity is one that has played a central role in educational research and policy since *Brown v. Board of Education*, its meaning remains ambiguous and debates about its function have remained at the level of law and policy (Howe, 1992). “Equality” as it is employed throughout the QDF moves beyond an “equal access” or a “compensatory” understanding, and into a “participatory” interpretation (Howe, 1993). Central to this interpretation is its focus on providing for students opportunities that are “worth wanting”—or opportunities of “equal worth” (Howe, 1993, p. 329).

Howe (1993) describes opportunities “worth wanting” as those that reflect who students are, and specifically points out that social institutions, such as schools, should be places where these opportunities allow for “the effective expression and incorporation of cultural and gendered identities” (Howe, 1997, p. 31). Operating, however, under the assumption that identities are not static, that they are multi-faceted, socially constructed and discursively produced, and that their expression and recognition are contingent upon time and place, the QDF complicates this framing. It is first critical to consider the fact that students’ evolving identities are cultivated by interactions between the individuals themselves and the circumstances by which they are surrounded (Moses, 2002). Kymlicka (1991) and Moses (2002) argue that these choices have to be available in favorable social contexts. In other words, it is not enough that these opportunities merely exist, but that students have the ability to make choices “worth wanting” without paying a price (Howe, 1997). In trying to create “favorable social contexts” and choices that are “worth wanting,” we must recognize that oppression plays out differently in different contexts and ask, in each context, not who else do we need to include, but: Who are these spaces silencing? Who is

being left out? What about those in the margins (Kumashiro, 2001)? There must be attention to the fact that “full inclusion is impossible,” that choices cannot necessarily be determined in advance; “life itself becomes foreclosed when the right way is decided in advance, when we impose what is right for everyone and without finding a way to enter into community and to discover there the ‘right’ in the midst of cultural translation” (Butler, 2004, p. 39). Howe’s focus on “choices worth wanting” requires, then, that our knowledges, practices, and pedagogies be constantly interrogated, contested, redefined, and reworked (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 17), and that schools, teachers, and the educational system-at-large, interrogate the ways in which they have historically been remiss in both their policies and practices, and that they complicate the ways in which they understand students in the system and the spaces that are meant to hold them.

### **Queering the context**

Scholars of democratic theory contend that social contexts must include an “adequate range of options” (Moses, 2002; Howe, 1997) from which students can choose, options that make sense for their social, personal, and cultural identities, so they can be self-determined, autonomous “authors of their own lives” (Kymlicka, 1991). Given the nature of identity, and that there will never be a space in which all identities are acknowledged through inclusion of some sort, there is a need to probe more deeply into these perspectives. Because our identities are socially constituted, and that humanly, it is impossible to fit neatly into the boxes created by and for identity politics, is there ever a time when we can be the sole authors our own lives? The social and cultural contexts in which we live “give our identities, acts, desires, and relationships different meanings” (Wilchins, 1997 in Kumashiro, 2001, p. 8). This focus seems consistent with democratic thinking, its attention to “the interaction between [features of educational institutions]

and the characteristics that individuals bring to [them]” (Howe, 1997, Moses, 2003. Howe (1997) makes the case that in order to foster equal and meaningful opportunities “worth wanting” for all students, differences-- especially as they relate to self-identity and self-respect, must be acknowledged (Howe, 1997, p. 32). He seems, however, to consider these differences as “group” differences, or at least fails to adequately problematize the tension between group and individual identity, a strategy that is also employed through the participatory framework that he espouses. Young (2000) seems to be in the same boat. While she recognizes that “what constitutes a social group is not internal to the attributes and self-understanding of its members” (p. 391), she maintains, “groups defined by structural relations of privilege are most important for political theory because they often generate political conflicts and struggles” (p.390). Not only does this strategy fail to disrupt dangerous normative claims about who we are, our experiences in society, and in social institutions such as schools, it also does not attend to the voices in the margins, those who continue to be left out of the very groups to which they may belong. The implications of this reality cannot be ignored.

The QDF’s conceptualization of identity and its focus on context requires that there is a bit of unknowing; it admits that “groups” are politically necessary (Butler, 1992), yet too tidy (mis)understandings that aim to represent the complexities of who we all are and who we continue to become. Along, then, with attention to creating spaces that are inclusive of particular groups, there is acknowledgment of what we do not know, of the intersections of particular identity markers, and of the construction of margins that are created as we yearn to fight against oppression (Kumashiro, 2001). There is continued attention to the ways in which “human” exceeds all groups and categories, that the “history of the[se] categor[ies] is not over, and that ‘human’ is not captured once and for all” in any of them (Butler, 2004, p. 13). Creating

boundaries to “include” the voices of certain groups limits the anti-oppression work that can be done. This is not something to ignore if we are to move beyond ideas and goals of equality in theory only. Necessary, then, to the QDF is an expansion and complication of concepts that are often core to democratic theory and that inform its guiding principles, in particular concepts of recognition, nonoppression, self-determination and autonomy.

### **Queering the concepts**

Throughout Howe’s (1997) participatory interpretation of equality is the “requirement to include the needs, interests, and perspectives of all groups especially groups that have been historically excluded-- in determining what educational opportunities are indeed worth wanting” (p. 4). To satisfy this requirement, he endorsed a virtue of recognition and a principle of nonoppression. Recognition, according to Howe, moves us beyond mere tolerance toward respect for differences. As explored throughout this article, group recognition is politically necessary, yet not enough. Further, recognition can have consequences that are in opposition to its very intention; it can be both affirming and dispossessing (Butler, 2004). A “livable life” requires some form of recognition, but categories of recognition that make life unlivable or constraining (for example, binary gender categories) are unviable alternatives (Butler, 2004). Butler (2004) makes an important point when she acknowledges that

if schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that ‘undo’ the person by conferring recognition, or ‘undo’ us by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by this the human is differentially produced. (p. 2)

She further acknowledges that remaining unintelligible is a viable alternative to being recognized, if recognition, in fact, “intelligibility is understood as that which is produced as a

consequence of recognition according to prevailing social norms” (p. 3). A “sense of survival,” Butler explains, at times “depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred” (p. 3). Ideas of recognition, as conceptualized by democratic theory, must be troubled. Mere recognition (as in the case of FAIR, for example) for “groups that have been historically marginalized” through, for example, a model of inclusion, even a “partial model<sup>7</sup>” as Howe (1997, p. 69) suggests (attending to the impossibility of full inclusion,) without attention to, unpacking of, and disrupting normative structures and discourses that have perpetuated their oppression is not only not enough, but it is also problematic. Along with recognition-- for the sake of gaining, for example, civil rights, is the need to analyze social systems and discursive and cultural practices that continue to silence, ignore, name certain groups as “other” or make them invisible. Otherwise, there is a danger that the cycle will repeat, as it has throughout history.

Howe (1997) acknowledges that throughout history, the ways in which individuals or groups have been recognized (or not) has to do with how power and privilege function. To protect groups that have been historically marginalized or excluded from democratic participation, Howe suggests the need for a principle of nonoppression. This principle requires that rules and procedures be in place guaranteeing that “all groups that qualify as oppressed” are recognized so as to foster “genuine democratic negotiation” (p. 70). What is not acknowledged here is that power and privilege function in marginalized groups as well and often affect who

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<sup>7</sup> With respect to curricular inclusion, Howe (1997) suggests a partial model, to be “filled out in a way attuned to the cultural makeup of local communities” (p. 70). While this insight is important, it is problematic with respect to identities related to gender and sexual diversity, in that, for one, it is often not the case that sexuality can be “read” so there is no way to know how students might identify—as they sit in class or in the future. Second, this model suggests that inclusion should be considered only when there is representation of certain groups in a classroom or school. The problem with school climate, for example, as it affects LGBTQ students is perhaps because there is ignorance around sexualities other than ones endorsed by heteronormativity; it is critical to acknowledge the spectrum of gender and sexual diversity, and not only when there are LGBTQ students, families and community members are present.

“qualifies” as oppressed in the creation of certain rules and procedures. As Cohen (1996) suggests

...beyond examining the ways in which dominant groups and institutions change or alter their imposed definitions of marginal groups within different historical contexts, we must also understand how marginal group members define and redefine themselves, setting their standards for ‘full group membership’ (p. 363) (cited in Kumashiro, 2002, p. 5).

Attention to the ways that oppression is functioning in spaces requires that we continue to push on our understandings of difference, that we recognize that “[o]ne voice, or even one set of voices, can never reflect the rich diversity of a community or the rich complexity of a culture” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 11). Further, it requires that the ways in which we engage in anti-oppression work be lead by an intention to disrupt normative claims and understandings of group membership.

In her argument for race-conscious education policies, as they relate to educational opportunities that are “worth wanting,” Michele Moses (2002) names self-determination as central to education for democracy and justice. Within a contemporary liberal framework, Moses (2002) essentially defines personal autonomy as self-determination. The notion of personal autonomy that Moses (2002) puts forward is one that is rooted in a socialization account, that sees autonomy as a “competency that people acquire through socialization” (p. 17). She identifies with Raz’s (1986) “narrative conception of autonomy, where autonomy is seen more as a capacity” (p.17). Personal autonomy, according to Moses, “leads people to be the authors of their own lives (‘to speak in one’s own voice and to tell one’s own story) and to pursue their own conceptions of the good life (‘to apply the understanding arrived at to action in accord with one’s

own interests’)” (p.18).

While Moses claims, “individuals are at the center of liberal theory,” she admits that they are “understood only within their social and communal context” (p. 13). This dialogical relationship, between subject and social context, is one key component of Moses’ theoretical argument, as having “favorable social contexts” are primary to individuals being able to be “self-determining in a meaningful way;” they are what distinguishes autonomy in name only from an autonomy that Howe (1997) describes as “worth wanting” (Moses, 2001, p. 21). Moses views these “contexts of choice” as a “set of social conditions within which one’s personal and cultural identity is either affirmed or thwarted” a context within which one’s identity is not shaped, but can be exercised” (p. 25). She goes on to say that one’s “authentic identity” is developed between individuals and societal circumstances” and that self-determination is affected both positively and negatively by “one’s place within a dominant structural context and resulting life circumstances” (p. 20). Moses names a second requirement of self-determination: authenticity, which she defines as being true to oneself and to one’s social and cultural identities. Developing and maintaining an “authentic personal and cultural identity is thus a central feature of personal autonomy as self-determination (Taylor, 1994)” (p. 25).

Moses’ focus on personal and cultural identities, marginalized groups, and the need to create social policies that are meant to improve contexts of choice are not lost on the QDF. As I have argued throughout this article, politically, groups based on cultural, social, gendered, sexual identities (among many more) are necessary, especially because “[h]istory has shown us that important social changes are not often achieved in the United States without the force of law to compel them” (Moses, 2002, p. 1) and laws generally require that certain groups are named in their struggle for equal rights. In education specifically, in order for to fulfill a promise of equal

educational opportunity, policies that are “explicitly concerned with social justice” (Moses, 2002, p. 1) are essential, as I will explore throughout strand three. However, these groups, and associated identity markers, are incomplete. By invoking a “complicated characterization” of cultural identification and of identity in general, Moses (2002) calls attention to complex nature of who we are, our “authentic” identities, autonomy, and self-determination; however, in her claims, there is still the idea that personal autonomy is something that is achievable, that there are a specific set of “choices” that students, in the case of educational equity, may have, that would allow them to attain an authentic, autonomous self.

This requires some attention. Moses (2002) claims that a sense of authenticity is characterized by being true to oneself, and that this occurs in two ways, first, from the inside, from inner reflections, and second, in a more dialogical sense, from our relations with others (p. 26). A key component to the latter here is the “public recognition of one’s worth,” insight that she shares from Taylor (1991) (p. 26). She goes on to say that “this authenticity is not prescriptive in the sense that there are established identities into which one must fit, but is defined both privately (by the individual) and publicly (by the community and society)” (p. 26). This insight regarding public recognition reveals a tension in Moses’ claims. The QDF posits that the ways that we are recognized as human, made intelligible, (Butler, 1990, 2004a) are “socially articulated and changeable. And sometimes the very terms that confer ‘humanness’ on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals the possibility of meeting that status, producing a differential between the human and the less-than-human” (Butler, 2004a, p. 2). So, at once, contexts, by way of recognition, can be both “affirming” and “thwarting” (Moses, 2002); norms can function one way for some and another way for others (Butler, 2004a)—and not just for different individuals, but quite possibly for the same individual (e.g. a

white man who also identifies as gay). The QDF further acknowledges that recognition *requires* prescription and is a “site of power by which the human is differentially produced” (Butler, 2004a, p. 2); therefore, we are “not only constituted by our relations,” by the ways in which we are recognized, “we are also dispossessed by them” (Butler, 2004b, p. 24). In other words, in order to be recognizably human, to have rights conferred upon us, we must identify in certain ways that make us intelligible, choose from categories that are available to us. We are, then, both constituted by norms and dependent on them (Butler, 2004a); yet, as Butler (2004a) argues, we must also endeavor to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them” (p. 3). Participatory democratic theorists are on board here, for the most part, but what is missing from the democratic argument is this very important need “to live in ways that maintain”-- *not the categories themselves*, but “a critical and transformative relation to them.”

So, what then of ideas of autonomy and self-determination, of authenticity? Moses (2002) theorizes the concept of personal autonomy as “self-determination, [which is] characterized by a favorable social context of choice and a sense of authenticity in one’s personal and cultural identity” (p. 36). Butler (2004a) complicates ideas of autonomy and self-determination; she underscores the reality that we are born into social worlds, with established norms, that we did not choose, that we are constituted by these worlds, and that our agency is “riven with paradox” as a result (p.3). This is consistent with Young’s (2000) idea that social groups position individuals, though Young maintains, “a person’s identity is her own, formed in active relation to that social positioning... rather than constituted by it” (p. 391). She says, “individual subjects make their own identities, but not under conditions they choose” (p. 391). Young’s assertion seems to represent the paradox of which Butler speaks. Butler (2004a) further explains that in order to exercise self-determination, we must rely on institutions of social support; “self-

determination becomes a plausible concept only in the context of a social world that supports and enables that exercise of agency” (p.7). Using gender as her category of interest, she goes on to say that

changing the institutions by which humanly viable choice is established and maintained is a prerequisite for the exercise of self-determination. In this sense, individual agency is bound up with social critique and transformation. One only determines ‘one’s own’ sense of gender to the extent that social norms exist that support and enable that act of claiming gender for oneself. One is dependent on this ‘outside’ to lay claim to what is one’s own. The self must, in this way, be dispossessed in sociality in order to take possession of itself. (p.7).

Moses and Butler seem to converge on this point—that in order for self-determination to be an option, we must change institutions to establish “favorable social contexts” that include “viable choices.” For Moses, and other democratic theorists (e.g. Howe, 1997; Kymlicka, 1991; Young, 1990, 2000) these choices must be “worth wanting” so much as they speak to the cultural identities of those they are meant to serve. Butler (2004a) calls attention to the ways in which projects like this aim to make life more livable, that there is a focus on “distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict or eviscerate life itself” (p. 8). As I mentioned earlier, however, the same norms can be both permissive and restrictive at the same time. The QDF maintains that along with a focus on inclusion of choices that are consistent with what are perceived as, even complex, cultural identities, there must be attention to the critique of social norms “within the context of lives as they are lived” (Butler, 2004a, p. 8). This critique must be guided by the questions of “what maximizes the possibility for a livable life and what minimizes

the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death” (p. 8). Kumashiro’s (2002) insight here is helpful. In order to create spaces that are anti-oppressive, that are affirming, there must be continued attention to who and what we do not know. The questions become, again, not who else do we need to include, but who might this space, these contexts, oppress?

In the sense that Young (2000) recognizes what she calls, “internal exclusion,” inviting people to the table but putting constraints on their participation (e.g. not listening to them if they aren’t speaking the ‘right’ language; privileging certain types of expression), she seems to aim to move closer to disrupting normative structures of identity. Speaking specifically about democratic participation, Young (2000) cites three modes of communication that can, perhaps, get us beyond this type of exclusion—“greeting, rhetoric, and narrative” (p. 53). Detailing these modes is beyond the scope of this article, but a couple of notes are important, especially related to the mode of narrative. Young (2000) says that narrative has “several functions that counter exclusive tendencies”—among them, it “empowers relatively disenfranchised groups to assert themselves publicly” (p. 53). She maintains that narrative “exhibits the situated knowledge available from various social positions” (p. 76) and makes the important claim that a combination of narratives produces a “collective social wisdom” which allows people to develop “enlarged thought;” this has the capacity to transform the ways that people think about others, and about policies and actions that affect people differently, based on their social locations. Hearing stories and perspectives from all people is critical to ending oppression, but the idea of disenfranchised groups, whose narratives “can serve to explain to outsiders what practices, places, or symbols mean to the people who hold them and why they are valuable” (Young, 2000, p. 75) must be complicated. No doubt, these narratives will complicate the political categories that Young, and other democratic theorists, believe are necessary. We have to be willing to hear

what we haven't heard yet, and to open to the possibility of those stories, as politically necessary. Important to this point is that we don't take the field of human for granted, that we "think critically and ethically about the consequential ways that the human is being produced, reproduced and deproduced" (Butler, 2004, p. 35).

The QDF maintains that we need both the perspectives of Moses, Young, and Butler, both democratic and postmodern/post-structural and queer theoretical insights, and that they speak in solidarity. In arguing for protection against discrimination and for equity, for "legal protections and entitlements" (Butler, 2004b, p. 24), developing and implementing democratic policies that recognize and fight for group rights is essential. Though while these categories as they relate to, for example, sexual, cultural, racial, or gender identities might "establish our legitimacy within a legal framework ensconced in liberal versions of human ontology," (Butler, 2004b, p. 24) they do not make space for the necessity of "keeping our notion of the human open to a future articulation" which is essential to an on-going democratic ideology. While at this time in history, these categories, and the policies that are meant to protect people in them, are critical, there must be space, in the implementation of such policies for disrupting normative claims, for critically analyzing why these voices were left out in the first place, and for critiquing current norms and practices that are perpetuating oppression in general. With respect to these policies as they relate to education and equal educational opportunities, the QDF positions, districts, schools, and teachers as those who are responsible for "queering" their implementation.

To provide context and grounding for the Queered Democratic Framework, I turn my attention, in the next section, to schools and focus specifically on the ways in which heteronormative school climates shape students' experiences—often in dangerous ways. I use

recently passed California legislation, the FAIR Education Act as an example of a policy that is responsive to democratic purposes of education. By including communities that have historically been left out of , at the very least, the curriculum of public schools, FAIR makes an implicit attempt to create schools where students are safe to be themselves. I offer recommendations for teachers, teacher education, and professional development, holding teacher education programs, districts and schools accountable for providing support for teachers who are with our students each day. Too often, teachers are saddled with the obligation to bring policy into practice without support that is meaningful; this has to change if our schools are to be places where students feel safe, where they are affirmed, and where there is intention to disrupt normative assumptions that are oppressive.

### **Strand 3: The relationship between theory, policy, and practice**

#### **Democratic policies and queer interpretations: FAIR and the QDF in action**

Using FAIR as an example of a democratic policy, I will first explain the problem of relying on mere inclusion to satisfy the aims of democratic theory-- equality, justice and fairness, and choices that are “worth wanting.” I will then illuminate the ways in which using the QDF-- queering the implementation of FAIR, broadly-- with respect to school policies and norms, and particularly, with respect to classroom norms and curriculum—makes for the possibility of real social change, of moving toward an education that ultimately changes schools and society (Kumisharo, 2001) and of making true on promises of democratic education.

Heteronormativity, according to Richardson (2003) refers to “the institutionalized notion and structure of a very particular set of social practices and relationships of identity that are

based on and privilege heterosexuality, which in turn, is based on a particular set of ideas about what constitutes gender” (Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010, p. 247). Blackburn (2010) contends, “nearly every school in the United States is heteronormative” (p.626). The necessity of having laws and policies in place that aim to push against pervasive heteronormative school cultures is critical if schools are to be places that offer students opportunities of equal worth. Within the QDF, such legislation is critical. Blackburn’s (2010) assertion, however, taken as truth, means that policies that aim to provide for students equitable educational opportunities, so much as they push against heteronormativity (e.g. anti-bullying policies that specifically forbid the use of homophobic language, curricular inclusion of LGBTQ-themed texts or LGBTQ history) may struggle to land safely on the ground, in schools and in classrooms. The QDF recognizes that democratic policies with social justice aims may not be enough.

Central to a democratic, equal opportunity framework is that schools, as social institutions, are “obligated to actively eliminate the oppression of social groups, especially cultural imperialism, as manifested in curriculum, educational policies and practices, school structures, and norms” (Cochran-Smith, 2008, p.10). The FAIR Education Act, as a “fair” and “inclusive” policy, aims to do just this, in the same ways that multicultural education often aims to include groups that have been historically marginalized. FAIR’s purpose, and value, by introducing students to the contributions of LGBTQ people and to their history, is that it encourages students to see “other people as persons of value, as contributing to the welfare of our society and our nation” (Dinsmore, 2012). Visibility of LGBTQ people in any school curriculum is certainly an important advance, and one that intends on “eliminating oppression” by way of inclusion. Queering this framework, however, requires that more be done. Oppression is systemic and systematic—and it is context specific; it is not eliminated easily, even by law, as

is very clear when we consider the ways in which racism, for one, continues to function in our society, even after legislation has been established to demand otherwise. The problem here is at least three-fold.

First, adding “groups” that have been historically left out signals to students that these groups are monolithic, that one voice speaks for all, and that there is no variability in the ways in which intersectionality works to affect the lived experiences of people; we see the partial effects of this strategy in classrooms where students of nondominant identity groups are tokenized and asked to speak for their entire group. Second, the hope in using this additive model is that representations of, in this case, “authentic images of lesbians and gays” will at once, both quell hostility toward social difference “for those who cannot imagine difference” (Britzman, 1995, p. 220), as well as allow for students who identify as LGBTQ to see themselves in the curriculum, thus contributing to the ways in which they can be self-determined and autonomous, within and in relation to, their social contexts. However, in using this model without attention to the ways in which categories (i.e. heterosexual/ homosexual) are “historical productions that have served to regulate power relations of inequity,” we might encourage students to see “other people as persons of value,” and exacerbate inequality “by making the Other more visible as the Other” (Carlson, 1998, p. 97). Lastly, adding “more voices” without wondering with our students why certain voices were silenced in the first place, how the silencing functions within certain groups (e.g. differential silencing based on social class, gender or sexual identity, skin color), and which voices continue to be silenced (Kumashiro, 2002), we miss the opportunity to disrupt normative, oppressive structures that will likely be maintained without this important critique.

Understood through the QDF, the ways that students experience school is largely affected by the interaction between who they are—their dynamic, multi-faceted identities, how they are

identified-- and the contexts of their learning. In order, then, for students to have opportunities that are “worth wanting,” these contexts, according to the QDF, have to be responsive and dynamic, and the norms within them must be contested and subject to scrutiny. Further, students have to be able to make choices in these contexts, to be(come), without “paying a price” (Howe, 199, p. 332 ). This implies that while these spaces are meant to be supportive and affirming for students whose identities have been historically marginalized, they also have to be supportive for students who “cannot imagine what difference difference makes in curriculum” (Britzman, 1995, p. 220).

So, what does the implementation of a policy like FAIR, guided by the QDF look like, given the pervasive heteronormative spaces that are our schools. For one, a policy like FAIR should be supported by other democratic policies and school-wide practices such as those that aim to create safety and inclusivity with respect to gender and sexual diversity. These include enumerated bullying and harassment policies; dress codes that support gender variant youth; prom policies that welcome, for example, same-sex dates, attire that represents gender identities/ expressions of guests, and the voting of “kings” and “queens” to be respectful of students’ gender identities; information for parents/ guardians sent home without the assumption that all students have a mother and a father; physical environments of classrooms and schools that represent a diversity of families. This is not an exhaustive list, but underscores the many steps that can be taken, at multiple levels, to disrupt heteronormativity and to make space for FAIR to be not just an inclusive policy, but one that has the potential to shift school climate and culture. To create an environment of respect, an environment where students are safe to make choices that make sense to them and to who they are becoming, one policy that aims to include LGBTQ people and history for the sake of including a multicultural curriculum is not enough. It is not

enough for our LGBTQ students, but perhaps more importantly, it is not enough for students whose objective, knowingly or not, is to protect the heteronormative spaces in which they exist and thrive.

Perhaps one of the most powerful ways students can learn about how heteronormativity, as well as other oppressive and often invisible social structures, is in their classrooms and through the curriculum. I turn now to how the QDF can help make sense of how a democratic policy like FAIR can be implemented in such a way as to create both school and social change and to disrupt heteronormativity.

I often read theoretical pieces, or even empirical pieces that, in the “future directions” sections, give theoretical advice. And I often end these articles feeling like I want something more, like—*please help me figure out what to DO!* Since the QDF attempts to connect theory, policy, and practice, and because I am an experienced middle and high school classroom teacher and less so, but experienced as a teacher educator, my goal here is to attempt to give more than theoretical advice. As I offer these on-the-ground recommendations, I am aware that “there is a danger in presuming that the process of education is controllable, knowable, is something that we can succeed at with certainty” (Kumashiro, 2001a, p. 20). There is also a danger of setting a curriculum before or without knowing my students; please keep this in mind as you read on.

The curriculum for FAIR is not set; changes to state textbooks will not be mandated until 2015 (Penan, 2015). Until then, districts, schools, and teachers are left to decide when to include “age-appropriate” LGBT and disability inclusive history and curriculum in K-12 classrooms ([/www.gsanetwork.org/FAIR/campaign](http://www.gsanetwork.org/FAIR/campaign)). According to the Gay-Straight Alliance Network’s website, under FAIR, students might learn, in high school United States history class, about the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Within this unit, to address inclusion of LGBT

history, the Stonewall riots of 1969, which took place in New York City, and are foundational to the modern-day LGBTQ civil rights movement for equality, might be included.

Guided by the QDF, I draw heavily upon and am guided by Kumashiro's (2001b) insights and suggestions about how "posts" perspectives might function in the core (math, science, social studies and English) classrooms. Kumashiro admits the difficulty in translating, especially post-, theoretical perspectives into practice. He also addresses the need to think of even the suggestions that he puts forward as tools, not as universal remedies that will disrupt and cure oppression in our classrooms or in society-at-large. While Kumashiro pushes back on a model of inclusion, for the sake of merely including Other groups whose voices need to be heard, as in the case of a policy such as FAIR, he underscores the importance of inclusion for the sake of "its ability to change the underlying story of a curricular unit and its political effect (p. 6). Inclusion has the ability to "change narratives of the United States' role in simultaneously challenging and contributing to various oppressions" (p. 6). What I provide here are ideas for thinking about how this unit might be taken up centrally in a U.S. history and English Language Arts classes but will also explore, briefly, how this unit might be conceptualized and supported within the disciplines of math and science.

In a U.S. history class, to set up an inquiry into social and cultural movements<sup>8</sup>, Stonewall being part of the movement for LGBTQ rights, I might begin with a few essential questions, such as: *What's worth fighting for? What defines a revolution? "What are the characteristics of a leader? How are leaders chosen? How have civil rights been determined over time? What are key patterns and themes that are consistent across and within movements?*

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<sup>8</sup> Also included might be other movements such as those addressing civil rights for African Americans, Mexican Americans and Chicanos, American Indians, Women, and People with Disabilities, though this list is not exhaustive.

*What are the tensions across and within movements? What are some different perspectives about these movements? In other words, what are the different views about why these movements took place, if they were necessary, if they were justified, if they “worked” to gain civil rights for these groups? How are different perspectives about these movements addressed, in our textbook? What about in the news media? Whose voices most commonly tell stories of North America’s past? Present? With respect to insider’s views, for example, those who participated in Stonewall, what was Stonewall all about? What was the riot all about? Was it successful? How were leaders chosen? What were the different perspectives within this group? How did race and ethnicity function throughout the movement? What about gender? What about social class? Intersections of these?* These questions would likely be augmented with insight and interest from students and would guide our unit and the activities and assignments therein. Lesson plans associated with this unit would be guided by grade-level research standards, and would be dependent on other standards that I wanted to address throughout the unit. Another strand of this inquiry would be focused on current events, including those popular throughout social media (e.g. topics such as anti-bullying, body politics, immigration and undocumented students, LGBTQ issues in schools, the gay marriage debate, underrepresentation of students of color on college campuses, and other equity-focused topics of interest). Similar questions would apply and would include mindful critiques of how certain issues and inequities persist over time. This might launch us into an explicit discussion about how normative systems function to create inequity. What would also be central to this unit is a focus on critical self-reflection, a look into ourselves, and to the ways in which, for example, our actions, inaction, silence, innocence, ignorance, judgments, voices—serve to perpetuate the very systems that this unit is meant to expose.

Teachers of the English Language Arts (ELA) are well-positioned not only to include LGBTQ-themed texts,<sup>9</sup> but to call attention to the stories that we know, that we've known over time, who has been, and still is, allowed to story themselves-- and whose stories are told for them. To support FAIR—and to complement the U.S. history unit mentioned above, I might consider some guiding themes related to social justice—such as fairness, equity, power, struggle, resistance, and privilege. I'd first have them explore these concepts—*What do these concepts mean? Does everyone agree on their meanings? Can they have different meanings to different people when considering the same issues? What do these concepts look like?* I would then turn my attention to the ways in which these concepts play out through stories—both fiction and nonfiction, written and performed, and I would focus students' attention on the ways in which these concepts sound from different voices, what they feel like. I would not only include authors, poets, musicians and visual artists to have students engage with these concepts, and with our central questions, but I would also have them review pieces from voices in opposition to LGBTQ rights, those who denounced the movement. Assignments and activities would be geared toward personal connection to the material, as well as how we connect, as a classroom community, to these concepts. How are these concepts functioning in our own stories? In how we story others? In whose voices we listen to or trust as legitimate?

English Language Arts (ELA) teachers can invite students to think about and critique the ways in which both fiction and nonfiction in standard school curriculum, have essentialized, marginalized, simplified, lauded, and made more complex, who we are. What is also unique to the role of ELA classes are the powerful ways that “identity matters” (McCarthy & Moje, 2002) in the development of reading and writing practices, and conversely, that reading and writing

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<sup>9</sup> For curriculum ideas, please refer to <https://sites.google.com/site/queeringtheclassroom/>, a website created by my colleague Sara Staley and I to support ELA teachers around curriculum related to gender and sexual diversity.

matter for how one identifies and how one is identified (Moji & MuQaribu, 2003, p. 204). For this reason, Clarke & Blackburn (2007) remind teachers to be conscious of and intentional about the ways in which they position students in their readings of LGBTQ-themed texts; they suggest that in the readings of these texts, teachers position students as LGBTQ, as straight allies or as potential allies—and encourage students to engage with the texts as both windows (Bishop, 1992) and mirrors. Recognizing the complexity of identity, Clarke & Blackburn (2007) suggest that texts can, at once, be both windows for students (i.e. a straight student looking into the world of a lesbian character) and mirrors (i.e. the same straight student who can identify with a character of color). Including multiple voices must be accompanied by critical readings of the texts; in other words, the words on the page must not come to represent truth, or the realities of the different characters (and their identities) and students must be guided to read for the silences in texts and to think about what these silences might represent (Kumashiro, 2001b). Also, literacy practices, particularly related to difference, power, and privilege, should include critical self-reflection—should invite (demand) students to feel through the sometimes difficult, uncomfortable voices and stories that may challenge their sense of self and what is “normal” (Kumashiro, 2001b). Kumashiro (2001b) captures this process in the notion of *crisis*: this discomfiting and upsetting process what takes place when students learn that “*they very way in which we think and do things is not only partial but oppressing*” (p. 8; italics in original). There must be attention to the ways that students (and even teachers) might react to or resist new knowledges, especially knowledges that include LGBTQ people and topics, there is danger of backfire (Britzman, 1995, p. 219). Britzman continues “[p]edagogical thought must begin to acknowledge that receiving knowledge is a problem for the learner and the teacher, particularly when the knowledge one already possesses or is possessed by works as an entitlement to one’s

ignorance or when the knowledge encountered cannot be incorporated because it disrupts how the self might imagine itself and others “ (p. 220). In an ELA classroom, where teachers are asking students to engage, to be vulnerable, to connect to, and even to resist various texts, an environment must be created where there is space for crisis—and in which students are safe to grow. This cannot be understated.

It is often the case that when I work with teachers, and I mention that in order to disrupt heteronormativity in schools, all teachers have to be on board-- math and science teachers have knew-jerk reactions of “impossible.” While I will not go into too much detail about the ways in which this is, instead, possible, I will provide a few simple ideas. In a math classroom, writing word problems that are representative of same-sex couples and being cognizant of the different activities that boys and girls are doing and how they are positioned with respect to gendered identities, are two strategies that serve to disrupt normative relationships and gender roles, both typically heteronormative (Meyer, 2010). Further, in solving problems in math, Kumashiro (2001b), citing Ladson-Billings (1995), suggests involving students in the problem-solving by having them invest in and investigate problems that are relevant to their lives. By having students assess their school climate and culture, with questions that are relevant to them—and that include issues of identity, they can analyze quantitative data, create visual representations, and even present the findings at an all-school gathering, with the idea that in doing so, students together could create a plan of action to focus on positive school climate and a culture that is affirming and safe for all students. Teachers could, of course, also benefit from these data. Kumashiro (2001b) also suggests ways that students can question and critique ways of knowing in math, and also science. While “scientific knowledge” is typically taken as fact, he suggests supporting students to questions science and stories that have been told by science. Considering FAIR, a

science class could easily take up the ways in which science has served to perpetuate harmful and oppressive “facts” about homosexuality as a pathology or illness, or the discourse around the AIDS epidemic and its effects of on the lived experiences of LGBTQ people, infected or not—“the exclusion, discrimination, social policing and moral panic” (Britzman, 1995, p. 221) that was created.

### **Conclusion**

The passage of the FAIR Education Act in California marks a milestone for LGBTQ people and history—and for schools and curriculum. Mandating that schools recognize and include—make intelligible—a people who have historically been, and continue to be, excluded from school spaces is critical to shifting this dangerous paradigm of silence. This policy of inclusion alone, however, without attention to its implementation, may not be enough. Establishing a line of communication between democratic and postmodern/post-structural and queer theories is necessary to take Butler’s (2004) “double path in politics”; this is central to creating educational spaces that shift both schools and society. The QDF requires that these democratic policies be in place, as fighting for “group rights” is a necessary political strategy for society, as it is. It also, however, requires that we complicate the very categories and identities that the policies aim to acknowledge. In making true on promises of equality and justice, the QDF calls attention to the intersections, the margins, and the nuances of identity and how these are consequential to the lived experiences of students in our schools. It necessitates seeing identity as personal, relational, and political-- and identity categories as (for now) politically necessary, but in which “‘human’ is not captured once and for all” (Butler, 2004, p. 13). Dynamic by nature, the QDF is responsive to contexts and to people. It challenges those who are responsible for implementation of, in this case, a “respectful and inclusive” policy, to engage

with history in ways that are self-reflective and to complicate notions of “normal” and of “Other,” and to engage students to think beyond identity categories. Further, it calls attention to the ways in which power and privilege are functioning in society, in schools, and in classrooms. Working together, I argue that democratic and postmodern/post-structural and queer theories function to provide for students more equitable educational opportunities that are “worth wanting” (Howe, 1997). Together, they attend to society as it is; yet they importantly recognize the need to push society to grow, to be more expansive, and to move toward eradicating oppression in all of its forms.

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## Tilling the Soil for LGBTQ Inclusive Policies: Learning from Desegregation to Cultivate Safe and Inclusive Communities

### Introduction

Situated in broader sociopolitical contexts of inequality, schools are often battlegrounds for students who do not “fit” the norm. Schools are microcosms of a society that has historically categorized people based on immutable and variable characteristics, often naming certain identities as more or less valuable, worthy, or even human. Over time, legislation has been passed in an attempt to make schools more equitable and democratic. Yet these laws or policies and the (lack of) consideration given to their implementation often seem to ignore both the larger social contexts in which schools are situated and the unintended consequences of these policies during their implementation.

In this article, I take up the following research question: *What happens when schools try to heal<sup>10</sup> the harms caused by heteronormativity through fostering safe and inclusive school climates?* In the context of a year-long study at one public middle school in southern California, I consider the relationship between policy and practice and, in particular, a policy that “rub[s] against societal norms” (Stuart-Wells, 2004, p. 4). The Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act was passed in California on April 14, 2011. FAIR prohibits adoption of

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<sup>10</sup> I use heal instead of terms more commonly used in Queer theory related to challenging heteronormativity (e.g., disrupting), because healing signifies an attentive and intentional process of both challenging the language and assumptions of heteronormativity and addressing the harm caused by heteronormativity. While I don’t think the two concepts are different, necessarily, I do think that when something is disrupted without attention to its healing, then it grows back all catawampus. When it comes to issues of identity that have caused the need for healing, we can’t afford this. Therefore the concept of healing is central to the larger project of challenging heteronormativity in schools.

discriminatory materials and amends the Education Code to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Americans, people with disabilities, and Pacific Islanders in the social sciences curriculum. The law took effect on January 1, 2012 with textbooks changing in 2015 (Penan, 2013). Research indicates that curricular inclusion increases safety, creates healthier climates, and fosters in students a greater sense of connectedness when they see themselves in curriculum (GSA Network, 2013). The same research shows that administrator support and buy-in from the school community are critical to FAIR's success. I argue that policies focused on equity cannot be expected in and of themselves to overcome social ills that are obstacles to their implementation (see also Wells et al, 1997). Rather, relying on lessons learned from *Brown v. Board*,<sup>11</sup> I argue that in order for the successful implementation of equity-focused policies such as FAIR, several considerations are essential: attention to the relationship between schools and society such that larger societal forces that may influence implementation are considered (Wells et al, 2004); acknowledgment that the laws themselves may not be enough and that those working for justice “should rely less on judicial decisions and more on tactics, actions, and even attitudes that challenge the continuing assumptions of white dominance”<sup>12</sup> (Bell, 2005, p. 9); recognition that these policies may have negative effects on the students that they are meant to serve (DuBois, 1935; Bell, 2004); and, given the lessons mentioned above, awareness that working for social change requires relying on all members of the school community, that is, on administrators, teachers, parents and students (Wells & Crain, 1997).

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<sup>11</sup> *Brown v. Board of Education*, (1954), was a United States Supreme Court case that declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students unconstitutional. *Brown* overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), which allowed state-sponsored segregation, to the extent that it applied to public education (<http://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/get-involved/federal-court-activities/brown-board-education-re-enactment/history.aspx>).

<sup>12</sup> While Bell focuses on race, his ideas apply to issues of inequality more broadly construed. FAIR's implementation may be more about challenging assumptions related to heteronormativity than about the specifications of the law itself.

In comparing the implementation of FAIR to the placing of African American students, largely outnumbered, into previously all-white schools, thrusting them into what could be described as “hells where they [were] ridiculed and hated” (DuBois, 1935, p. 331), I am not trying to equate one type of human suffering with another. I am, however, suggesting that we pay attention to the ways in which, in the case of *Brown*, the soil *was not tilled*. The inhospitable ground where *Brown* was to land was not directly addressed in implementation efforts. This left teachers, students, and parents without tools to contribute to the desired change; it also allowed silences and resistance to persist and grow, thus undermining the intent of the law and the pursuit of justice. In order to implement legislation that “rubs against social norms” (Wells et al, 2004, p. 49), the ground in which this legislation is to land must be directly addressed and efforts must be made to *till the soil* for its success. FAIR has landed in similarly inhospitable ground; while many people support the policy, many others vehemently oppose it—and many who do support it have little knowledge or experience with how to handle it. These insights guided my study.

Throughout this study, I worked as a professional developer with one school community to cultivate hospitable ground, that is, an environment prepared to embrace FAIR. At the same time, I worked as a researcher; my goal was to understand the complex processes involved in praxis and change with respect to FAIR. Throughout my study, I employed a community development model, which challenges and queers traditional teacher-centered professional development (PD). This model troubles ideas of accountability: it takes the focus off of teachers as the primary conduits for change, places responsibility on all stakeholders in the community, and recognizes that “everyone who affects student learning must be learning virtually all the time” (Sparks quoted in Guskey, 2000, p. ix). Further, it acknowledges that all stakeholders are embedded in structures and cultures that need to be considered for any effects to be sustained

(Guskey, 2000).

In this article, I first present insights from desegregation literature in which scholars share concerns (DuBois, 1935) and reflections (e.g. Bell, 2005; Wells & Crain, 1997; Wells, et al, 2004) about desegregation more broadly and about *Brown* in particular. I report these insights in an effort to make important connections between the *Brown* decision and the FAIR legislation, especially given the contexts within which both were to be implemented. Guided by these insights, I then explain the sociopolitical context in which FAIR was passed. I go on to give descriptions of interventions that I attempted during my empirical study of FAIR's implementation and community members' responses to these efforts. The data include focused conversations and PD with teachers; student interventions; and one parent presentation focused on FAIR, safety and school culture. I offer this study as an example of what it might look like to *till the soil*, that is, to prepare a community to understand and implement equity-focused legislation with the intention of creating safety, inclusivity, and of healing harms caused by heteronormativity.

### ***Desegregation and soil not tilled: Lessons learned***

In an effort to make good on promises of democracy and justice,<sup>13</sup> in 1954, the United States Supreme Court, in its “landmark” decision, deemed segregation unconstitutional, essentially overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson*. *Brown* was to pave the way for desegregation. Wells et al (2004) argue that in order to understand the success or failure of school desegregation, and policies like it, we must understand the complex and iterative relationship between schools and broader social contexts. They call attention to the ways in which broader social and political

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<sup>13</sup> The ways in which the decision of *Brown v. Board* was more about interest convergence (Bell, 2005) than about constitutionality or altruism are beyond the scope of this paper.

contexts need to be examined to understand how equity-minded policies are taken up in schools and how these contexts impact implementation. Wells et al (2004) reflect, “nowhere should the relationship between schools and society be more apparent than in communities struggling to implement a policy such as school desegregation that so rubs against the societal norms of racial segregation” (p. 49). In the wake of *Brown*, schools were undoubtedly going to feel the repercussions of a racially segregated and unequal society, making the focus of the relationship between school and society imperative (Wells et al, 2004). Wells et al (2004) argue for a focus on the challenges that schools faced in trying to, in the case of *Brown*, “institute an ostensibly antiracist policy in the midst of widespread racism” (p. 65) and maintain that this relationship needs to be a focus in the research that we do in schools. Educators, students, and parents are no doubt influenced by both their local communities, as well as by larger societal forces; it is important to understand how these influences “constrain or enable educational policies” (Wells et al, 2004, p. 50), as well as how they affect within-school practices.

This focus, on the relationship between schools and society, is not only necessary to the success of equity-focused policies but, more importantly, to the internal<sup>14</sup> and external safety (Leonardi & Saenz, forthcoming) of the students these laws are meant to serve. Equity-focused policies can incite fear, resistance and downright hatred.<sup>15</sup> The effort to make oppressed peoples “intelligible” in environments where *the soil is not tilled*, that is, in contexts where their identities have been challenged to “count as human,” and their lives to “count as lives” (Butler,

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<sup>14</sup> Briefly, the concept of internal safety moves beyond a focus on physical danger and refers to students feeling safe to be themselves.

<sup>15</sup> i.e. Several groups have fought to block FAIR’s passage in the interest of protecting kids from “morally unsafe” schools (e.g. Protect Kids Foundation, The Campaign for Children and Families, Concerned Parents United, Keeping Families Together).

p. 20, 2004), can result in them being “despised and resented... made mock of... neglected or bullied... and [can] literally render... [their lives] a living hell (DuBois, p. 331). An NAACP attorney during the *Brown* era, Bell (2005) admitted that during the implementation of *Brown*, he was “more committed than wise”; he regretted not paying more attention to “all those students less able to overcome the hostility and the sense of alienation they faced at mainly white schools. They fared poorly or dropped out of school. Truly, these were the real victims of the great school desegregation campaign” (p. 121). When laws are passed, when fairness is institutionalized without support from communities-at-large, what happens? While aiming to afford students more equitable educational opportunities, legislation resulting from *Brown v. Board*, or that of FAIR, may actually have quite the opposite effects. In the case of *Brown*, students of color were met with the same kind of discrimination they faced in society (Wells, et al, 2004). These policies, while necessary, in and of themselves, are not enough.

In his pre-*Brown* musings about whether or not “the negro need[ed] separate schools,” Dubois (1935) warned that legislation may not be enough. He said “[a]ny agitation and action aimed at compelling a rich and powerful majority of the citizens to do what they will not do, is useless” (p. 329). Reflecting on his work, Bell (2005) wondered why he was trying to get children admitted to schools that did not want them there and in which they might not fare well or succeed. There was still, despite *Brown*, an “unwillingness to treat blacks as full citizens” (p. 105). This resistance, Bell (1995) argued, “probably cannot be changed by law” as it “exist[ed] in the opinion and feelings of the community” (p. 105). Citing the “attitudes of white people” (p. 330) as a problem that would not be solved in his lifetime, DuBois (1935) troubled the value and potential success of “the great school desegregation campaign” (Bell, 2005, p. 121) saying:

[t]he result of the experiment may be a complete ruin of character, gift, and ability and ingrained hatred of schools and men. For this kind of battle thus indicated, most children are under no circumstances suited. It is the refinement of cruelty to require it of them. (p. 331)

*Brown* “was a dramatic instance of a remedy that promised to correct deficiencies in justice far deeper than the Supreme Court was able to understand” (Bell, 2005, p. 10). How was this policy supposed to be safe in schools, when some factions in society-at-large were so repelled by its goals? Moreover, how were students supposed to be safe when the same dispositions existed in schools themselves? The move to desegregate, deemed a “radical strategy,” was incongruous with “virtually every cultural and structural element of our society” (Wells et al, 1997 p. 2). The problem here is not with the policy itself, but with schools and communities not being adequately prepared, educated, and ready to implement such “radical” strategies.

### ***What lessons learned from desegregation can teach us about implementing FAIR***

Considering larger social and political contexts and their relationships to schools is critical for researchers, policy-makers, and practitioners concerned about the implementation of FAIR. In this case, heteronormativity and its more explicit counterpart, homophobia, are, like racism: woven into the fabric of American society (Bell, 2005), like “smog in the air” (Tatum, 2003). Therefore, we must assume that the same prejudices and intolerances, privileges and restrictions that are evident in society, as well as in related social institutions, will also exist in schools (Miller, 1952). We also have to assume that individuals implementing this policy will be met with resistance, as they will be swimming against an extremely powerful tide (Wells et al, 1997).

At the time of FAIR’s passage, the sociopolitical context hinted at a more equitable and human future for LGBTQ<sup>16</sup> people, but generally speaking was not inviting to a bill of this kind and was largely influenced by pervasive heteronormative ideals. In the midst of discussions to overturn the ruling on Proposition 8<sup>17</sup> and the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA),<sup>18</sup> there was also a mandate to overturn “No Promo Homo”<sup>19</sup> policies in Minnesota—but only after a rash of LGBTQ suicides in the Annoka-Hennepin school district; that change was not welcomed by all in the community (Murphy, 2012). While Minnesota was forced to reconsider its stance, Alabama, Arizona, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah upheld exclusionary policies. Arizona, for example, mandates that “no district shall include in its course of study instruction which...(1) promotes a homosexual life-style...(2) portrays homosexuality as a positive alternative life-style...[or] (3) suggests that some methods of sex are safe methods of homosexual sex” (<http://glsen.org/learn/policy/issues/nopromohomo>). This lack of support and recognition for LGBTQ people and issues extends beyond sex education and curricular inclusion and into the physical and emotional safety of students. While research shows that fully enumerated bullying policies<sup>20</sup> are effective in improving school climate, only fifteen states have laws that prohibit bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender

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<sup>16</sup> Throughout this paper, various forms of acronyms are used, depending on the sources to which I refer. In speaking broadly about this community, I use LGBTQ, which refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\* and queer. "Trans\*" is an umbrella term that includes a range of gender identities (e.g., transgender, transsexual, genderqueer) within the gender identity spectrum. “Queer” is also an umbrella term and includes people who are questioning, gender nonconforming and/or who do not identify in any specific category related to gender and sexuality. Both terms are meant to capture the natural spectrum of gender and sexual diversity.

<sup>17</sup> In 2008, Proposition 8 eliminated the right of same-sex couples to marry in California.; it was overturned in 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Section 3 of DOMA, a 1996 law that denied legally married same –sex couples over 1, 100 rights, was ruled unconstitutional in June, 2013 (<http://www.freedomtomarry.org/states/entry/c/doma>)

<sup>19</sup> These policies prohibited faculty from casting homosexuality in a positive light.

<sup>20</sup> Enumerated bullying policies list the characteristics of students most frequently the subject of bullying and harassment (e.g. race, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, disability and religion ([www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org))).

identity. There are two states that even go so far as to prohibit school districts from implementing enumerated policies: Missouri and South Dakota (<http://glsen.org/article/state-maps>). Meanwhile, LGBTQ youth suicides, many of which were prompted by experiences in schools, continue to be a profound concern (McKinley, 2010). It is also worth noting that general resistance to LGBTQ people and topics, as well as resistance to FAIR, emerges from LGBTQ students' own families (Friend, 1993) and from teachers. Teachers, for example, often allow the negative use of the words "gay" and "homo" in their classrooms, leaving heteronormative discourse undisturbed (e.g. Bower and Klecka, 2009; Dessel, 2010; Petrovic and Rosiek, 2010).

With its focus on curricular inclusion, FAIR aims to move beyond anti-bullying legislation and to create school environments that are more inclusive. While there is resistance, there are also teachers who report interest and excitement about the law. However, as stated by "Implementing Lessons that Matter," a report (2013) put out by the Gay Straight Alliance Network, "[while] LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in schools contribute to safer school climates... for the most part, these lessons are not being taught." Researchers found, despite the passage of FAIR, "barrier after barrier preventing the implementation of LGBT-inclusive lessons" (Laub, 2013). Teachers reported lacking resources, administrator support, and professional development as key barriers. Laub (2013) connects these barriers to "the larger puzzle of school safety" where "teachers who have not been trained in how to respond to bullying and anti-LGBTQ slurs feel unprepared to bring up LGBTQ historical figures in their classrooms." This not only supports the notion that laws may not be enough, but it also forces us to consider the adverse effects a law like FAIR may have. If teachers are not supported to implement FAIR, their continued silence, in the face of the law, gives students the message that LGBTQ people and history are not important.

Also, without unpacking and critiquing social systems that have long served to omit LGBTQ people, inclusion in name only may reinforce inequalities by positioning LGBTQ people as “Other,” or different from the norm (Carlson, 1998; Kumashiro, 2002). While these barriers were among the most common, participants also reported, “[e]very member of the school community has a role to play, and implementation works best when all are engaged” (Laub, 2013).

The quandary, then, in considering the implementation of FAIR is not whether to abandon a bill that society may not be willing to support and that might be incongruous with mainstream ideology. Rather, it is in figuring out how to prepare schools for this policy, taking for granted that there will push back. It is in figuring out how to *till the soil*—how to cultivate the land, so that all that rests in the space is safe to grow. It is about learning from a history in which the relationship between school and society was not enough of a focus and in which reliance on the law itself left those responsible for implementation without necessary support; it is about considering the daily lives and experiences of students who are to benefit from the law, and it is about supporting all stakeholders to bring an equity-focused policy into practice. Through my work and research in a California middle school, I aimed to support educators and a school community to *till the soil* for FAIR’s implementation.

### ***Research Context and Participants: Hope Academy***

Opening its doors in the fall of 2012, Hope Academy is a charter school for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students and is located in an urban metropolis in southern California. Hope is committed to supporting a socioeconomically diverse population of students, to educational excellence,

community, parent involvement, and connection. Part of its mission is to create a diverse community and at the end of its first year Hope's enrollment was reflective of this goal. At the start of the 2012-13 school year, the student population included 37% white, 29% African American, 20% Latino, 14% students of Asian descent, American Indian descent, and students who declined to state. Thirty-four percent of Hope's students received free or reduced-priced lunch. Staff participants in my study also represented a range of racial/ ethnic, sex, religious affiliations, and sexual orientations. Within the staff, ten teachers identified as heterosexual or straight, one as gay, and two as bisexual. Six staff members identified as white, one as black, one as African American, one as Persian, one as Asian (Chinese), one as Mexican American, and one as East Indian. Five staff members identified as men and eight as women.

Parents who attended the evening presentation also were participants in this study, as they completed post-presentation questionnaires. I interviewed 7 parents who, after attending the evening, were emailed by the principal with an invitation to be interviewed and who volunteered to speak with me. I also interviewed 13 students, who were chosen by teachers and the principal based on criteria that I sent to them about students who they thought felt varying levels of safety at Hope. Student participants filled out post-presentation questionnaires as well. Questionnaires and interview protocols can be found in Appendix A; criteria for choosing students was included in an email that I sent to teachers and can be found in Appendix B.

## **Methods**

### ***Visits to Hope Academy***

The arguments I make herein are based in a year-long case study of Hope Academy's response to professional and Community Development<sup>21</sup> programming focused on implementation of the FAIR Education Act. Ultimately, I argue for a queered conception of a traditional professional development model in which teachers are "trained" and held accountable for implementing new programs, policies, or practices. I maintain that a Community Development model is necessary to give schools the best chance for successful implementation, the best chance to *till the soil* for equity-based policies. In this model all stakeholders-- teachers, administration, staff, parents, and students, are supported to understand and be held accountable to equity-based policies, the implementation of which may be stifled or compromised in oppressive sociopolitical contexts. My rationale for using this model was informed by the desegregation literature, and the idea that implementation of policies that "rub against social norms" are most successful when all stakeholders are involved. Importantly, while this model was an emerging idea of mine, it came to fruition mainly because teachers called for including parents and students in our initial conversations.

In this study, I was a key actor with several roles: At the invitation of the school's principal, I developed and facilitated PD programming for teachers and staff; I developed and facilitated programming for the parents and school community members to introduce and explain FAIR and to support them in understanding LGBTQ issues in schools; I developed programming for the students, which was facilitated by the principal, teachers, and invited speakers. This programming included learning about and discussing LGBTQ terminology and GSD more broadly, engaging in classroom discussions, and attending all-school meetings focused on scenarios related to LGBTQ people and topics. I was also the researcher in this case study. The interventions that I implemented were rooted in critical and transformative pedagogies (Sleeter &

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<sup>21</sup> To my knowledge, this term has not been used in previous scholarship related to education.

Delgado Bernal, 2004; Giroux, 2004; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), were research-based, and were derived from a review of the literature on professional development related to GSD (Dessel, 2010; Riggs, et al, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2010; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2010; Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Meyer, 2008). Also informing the interventions' designs were my experience as an educator and insights from Queer and Democratic theories, all of which I describe in more detail elsewhere (Leonardi, forthcoming).

Throughout the 2012- 2013 school year, I visited Hope Academy six times, usually staying for a full school week. In August, before school started, I provided nearly ten hours of directed PD for teachers and administrators. In October, I went back to Hope Academy and spent six hours of connected PD with teachers and administration. The PD programming that I delivered in both August and October had three strands: knowledge, critical self-reflection, and action. Throughout the PD, staff were exposed to information about the experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools, research on teachers and their role in both perpetuating and disrupting heteronormativity, and insights about how to be more inclusive in both the academic and social curriculum. They participated in activities, both together and as individuals, which were meant to facilitate self-reflection. Participants were also asked to engage in activities and scenarios in which they were to take action—in the planning of lessons, in conversations with resistant parents, and in developing classroom and school-wide norms that would disrupt heteronormativity.

In our initial conversations, what became obvious was the effect that normative social discourses related to the inclusion of GSD, through FAIR, had on faculty at the school (Leonardi, forthcoming). This relationship, *between school--* what teachers were supposed to do with

respect to the implementation of FAIR, *and larger societal forces*-- discourses of resistance and fear, were central in our conversations and in how teachers talked about their roles in bringing this policy into practice. In these conversations, teachers called for the need to raise awareness about FAIR with students and with the community-at-large. In response to the spoken need of teachers, for my December visit I planned and implemented programming<sup>22</sup> for parents and families in an effort to explain and support them in understanding FAIR and Seth's Law,<sup>23</sup> as well as to provide them with information about LGBTQ youth and their experiences in school. For this evening, I partnered with Affinity Arts Consulting (AAC)<sup>24</sup> to organize an interactive experience in which audience members were challenged to engage with issues of GSD as they may come up in their own school community. Also for this visit, AAC developed a scene and follow-up conversation to engage the students in a conversation about GSD. Throughout my visits in January, March, and May, I conducted casual classroom observations, spoke informally with teachers, students, and parents, and set up more formal interviews with parents and students about their experience with AAC, general feelings of safety at Hope, and their perspectives on FAIR and GSD. I also continued to support and connect with teachers throughout the year and ended with a final conversation, in May, 2013, to reflect on and to wrap up my time at Hope.

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

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<sup>22</sup> Focal interventions will be explained in the Data Analysis section of this article.

<sup>23</sup> While the focus in this article is on FAIR, Seth's Law had also just been passed. Seth's Law "strengthens existing state anti-bullying laws to help protect all California public school students. Seth's Law requires public schools in California to update their anti-bullying policies and programs, and it focuses on protecting students who are bullied based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity/gender expression, as well as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, disability, and religion" ([https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/asset\\_upload\\_file529\\_10688.pdf](https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/asset_upload_file529_10688.pdf)).

<sup>24</sup> Affinity Arts are "scholars and practitioners who use the art of theatre to create better cohesion between people & groups in community settings. Using theatrical practice Affinity Arts will engage your audience to expose/address/highlight/examine human interactions and create opportunities for better communication, skill & outcomes in an interactive model. Each presentation is customized to a particular audience and is specifically designed to engage the needs of that audience. Presentations/performances are meant to dialogue, engage community issues & provide opportunities for skill building" (<http://www.affinityartsconsulting.com/>)

Data sources included transcribed conversations with staff from August and October, staff reflective journals, August post-PD interviews with teachers, interviews with parents and students, AAC student performance field notes, and post-AAC performance questionnaires from both students and parents. While questionnaires included both quantitative and qualitative items, for this article, I focused mainly on participants' qualitative responses. I also used results of several items from school-administered surveys that were given to students in September and again in May. Overall, these surveys were meant to capture students' perceptions and senses of internal safety (Leonardi & Saenz, forthcoming) and climate of their former schools and of Hope. In my analysis, I focused on items that were specific to gender and sexual diversity (see Appendix C). While these were the primary data sources for my analysis, I situated these data within those collected throughout the year, including teachers' written reflections; interviews with teachers and the principal; field notes from classroom observations, AAC-performances, and all-school meetings/interventions; informal conversations with students, teachers, and parents; curriculum content, and GSD-related policies.

To analyze these data, I used an inductive approach to code all of the transcribed professional development conversations from August and October, created a codebook, and looked for recurring themes and patterns. These themes and patterns were fine-tuned over several close readings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and triangulated with themes from staff pre-PD surveys, post-PD interviews, and reflective journals. Themes that were salient were organized around and informed the key concept of a "Culture of Conversation." Several major strands developed to inform this concept, which I will unpack in the findings section: the need to be able to talk openly with one another and to create space within the staff to have honest and vulnerable conversations, the need to have conversations with students, and the need to communicate with

parents. Informed by these strands, interventions were designed and implemented to engage students and parents, and more data were collected.

Qualitative responses on post-AAC questionnaires for both students and parents were coded inductively. Here, I focused on the question “Do you think that yesterday’s performance and the topics discussed are important to talk about at school? Please explain.” I noted salient themes such as “At our school: It’s [important because it’s] happening here,” “Discuss is a way to end bullying,” and “It’s important to learn about this now because....” In parent surveys, I focused on the questions “Do you think it’s important for schools to introduce issues of gender and sexual diversity? Please explain” and fixed response questions: “Prior to/after attending this AAC performance, how interested were you in issues of gender and sexuality in schools?” I triangulated survey data for both parents and students with interview data. To understand more about the ways in which inductive themes related to larger issues, I turned to themes relevant in arguments made by desegregation scholars. These themes included the relationship between school and society, attention to “tactics, actions, and attitudes” that challenged heteronormativity, the fact that the law may not be enough, and the need for all stakeholders to be involved. I added these to my inductive codes and applied them within and across data sources using constant comparison method (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

## **Findings**

### **Tilling the soil: Creating a culture of conversation**

In analyzing initial conversations with staff, it became apparent that what was being cultivated was what I called a “Culture of Conversation.” This multidimensional theme was

invoked throughout these data as staff grappled with how to break the silence that is pervasive in schools around GSD (Friend 1993). Developed from participants' explicit focus on the value of discussion and dialogue, the Culture of Conversation (CC) moved beyond simply "talking about issues" (Laurie, August PD) or "essentializing identities" (Erika, August post-PD interview). There was explicit attention, not only on the need to talk, but also on *how* to talk. In their initial conversations, staff recognized that issues of gender and sexuality, and diversity in general, were often difficult to talk about. They also recognized that in order to create a CC school-wide, that is, with students and parents, which they aimed to do, they had to first cultivate this culture within their own staff community.

### **Building a culture of conversation in the staff**

As participants began talking about staff agreements, several themes emerged to define what they believed created a culture in which productive conversations could occur: the need to create safe spaces for people to express prejudices and biases; the need to be honest and willing to work with one another; the need to "come as you are"; and the need to recognize that this process of growing and of sharing with one another is not always easy. Staff also made connections to the ways in which who they were as people was influenced by society-at-large. These themes call attention to the lessons learned from desegregation; a CC, as defined within this staff, spoke to the relationship between schools and society, to the ways in which they had to make sense of FAIR and support each other in its implementation, and to the need to get all stakeholders involved in the conversation.

In an effort to begin by acknowledging the difficulty in talking about GSD, I said, even though "we are a team... we may not always land on the same line." I continued,

We may not all go to gay pride at the end of the year and that's really okay. I want to stress that because while I want people to think well of other people, we all have barriers, old beliefs, old patterns of thought that are really hard to dissolve. I want to be sure you all know that I respect that and hopefully you can understand that about one another as we start these conversations. (August, PD)

Laurie, the principal, spoke to this point:

I think that this really needs to be a safe place for people to be who they are, and that has to be an agreement, I mean, I just have to be able to say, you know what, I just really don't like gay people.... I don't feel this way, but I do have prejudices, and I need to be able to say that I have these... that I'm not over it and it has to be okay that I'm still stuck in my thinking, because otherwise I won't be able to get past it if I'm worrying about being judged, and not being able to talk about it... (August PD)

In a post-PD interview with Chad, I asked him to reflect on the PD—and to talk about a particular part that was the most helpful. He said:

[t]he part that was the most phenomenal was when you had everybody write down their own biases and I was amazed how honest people were about them.... The honesty that you got out of people... created tension at first, but then we're also like, here we are. We all have things that we're working with... and you have to mention it to make it real. That was important—people feeling freedom to be honest and to work with stuff (August PD).

Central to both Laurie's and Chad's thinking was the importance of spaces that allowed staff to be honest about where they were with respect to certain issues and to admit that they were all in

the process of growing. Chad's use of the word "freedom" seems to imply that this is not typical in spaces like this—and that the work that he would do, in a space free of judgment, would not only affect the group, but would also affect him as a person. Feeling grounded and safe to critically self-reflect is essential to being able to participate in a CC.

This importance of "coming as you are" (Scott, August PD) and sharing biases and prejudices that might get in the way of implementing FAIR, as well as of connecting as a staff, was shared by a number of participants. Related to this theme of "coming as you are" was the idea that who we are has a lot to do with where we come from. In a conversation about gender roles and assumptions, in which participants shared stereotypes about "boys" and "girls," Lucia began by explaining that her assumptions about boys and girls were influenced by "what [she] grew up with." James quickly added, "we live in it." Samuel, agreed with James, and explained,

...like, I was told—'you do not cry' by my grandpa; men do not cry. You are a man; men don't cry; I thought that's what I was supposed to be. (August PD)

Staff seemed to recognize that much of the difficulty in having these conversations was a result of "what our culture tells us" about different types of people (Terry, August PD). It seemed that recognizing this reality gave them space to listen to one another and to attribute the best intentions to one another, instead of shutting down or becoming defensive. Terry went on to explain that because of powerful societal and cultural influences, she assumed,

people do have prejudices that they got from their parents, grandparents and culture and that the work of the individual is to spend a lifetime working with those prejudices and moving beyond them. I assume that people in a situation like this are working with their prejudices in a similar vein, so I assume... that we're

all in the same zone.

In order to operate as a cohesive unit, the staff recognized the need to identify and interrogate the ways in which larger societal forces were operating within and among their own group, and how these forces were affecting their staff community, and potentially their school. They also recognized the discomfort in doing so. After anonymously sharing different prejudices and biases that they had, there was a short pause in conversation and then they all began to joke about what they had heard. I wondered with them about the move to laughter, and Chad admitted,

I think to myself that I wish the discomfort would go away and the only way to do that is to talk and sometimes laughing in the initial talking is part of it—but we're talking!! We're saying things!! (August PD)

Joni continued,

We're under such tremendous cultural pressure all the time and humor helps with that and we are releasing a lot of tension externally and internally. (August PD)

The conversation continued with staff sharing why, at times, humor is used in discussions like this. Erika, however, took the conversation down a different road and admitted,

I'm mad... at a lot of stuff, and that might be something that people have a hard time saying—but some stuff, it's like, you're just proving my stereotypes about you; I'm not mad at anyone specifically, but yeah, I got mad sometimes. (August PD)

Allowing both humor and anger into this space seemed to show the staff that they could all come as they were. While anger often incites fear or discomfort in education spaces (hooks, 1994), here it seemed to stretch the space, to give permission to participants to process their experiences in ways that were genuine to them. It also seemed to further solidify their commitment to be connected and to create this CC, a commitment that they kept throughout the year. Staff also realized that in order to serve students well, and to create with the student body a similar culture, they needed to work as a group. In fact, in October, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of PD, Alicia, after explaining that her group didn't get anything done, shared, "we've discovered there's a disconnect between staff members and because of that disconnect, as little or big as it is, it will prevent us from effectively doing this with kids...." The CC was enacted in this moment, and a little later, Laurie reminded teachers,

Part of the work that we're doing at this school is the work that we're doing here (points to herself, to her heart, and the around the room), because if we're not doing that work, we're really not going to be able to work with kids.... What gets in the way of us supporting kids is us not really being able to look at what gets in our own way, ...then how can you get to that place to create that safety? ...To the degree that we're able to do that work in our own lives, to create that space for ourselves, that's the degree that...we're not going to keep having to have these conversations... it is just going to happen, because that's the culture that we'll create.

The need to be honest and open with themselves and with one another was something that Laurie invited and encouraged staff to do. She repeatedly said things like "you're safe here" and "you can say whatever you want in here" (August, October PD). In these initial conversations, teachers noted possible barriers to the implementation of FAIR (e.g., religion, parents, student

pushback, themselves) and through their own dialogue and vulnerability, created a CC (as defined above) within their staff, sharing what their fears and vulnerabilities were, speaking candidly about their biases, and supporting one another to grow through these discussions. To be sure, this CC was not perfect; there were moments when certain teachers were silent or disengaged, or where subtle conflicts arose that went unresolved. These conflicts, however, were not left unattended. Throughout the year, Laurie mediated conversations between teachers who were struggling to connect, and so did I. There seemed to be a real intention to continue to move forward in connection. While negotiating this CC, they also recognized the importance of creating this culture with students as well.

### **Breaking the silence with students**

Throughout their conversations, teachers often spoke of the need to engage students. With respect to GSD, staff spoke about the need to “start conversations” (Laurie, August PD) “open up conversations” (Laurie, August PD), “open up possibilities to have conversations” (Alicia, August PD), “have this discussion” (Alicia, August PD) and that it is “really important to have these conversations [with students] right now, when they are young” (Lucia, August PD). Several subthemes emerged throughout this strand— conversations to create community, conversations to stop bullying/ to support resistant students, conversations throughout curriculum, and conversations to educate students.

In a discussion with staff about how safe they thought students felt at Hope, Chad urged the staff to realize that as a new school, their students were probably “coming from places where they didn’t have conversations about themselves, about sexuality and stuff like that,” and that at Hope,

...we're telling them that this is a kind of school culture and I think they want to believe us and we're showing them, but I think we just need to continue to show them that we're open to have these conversations [about sexuality and gender] and to address [bullying] and show them that we're dealing with it in ways that they've never seen before.... We are in this place where we have to show them that we mean business and that you [everyone] get to be yourself here.... (October PD)

Laurie continued,

Yeah, I think that kids feel good at this school.... It isn't that things don't happen here; it happens at every school. The difference is that we address it here, whether it's name calling, bullying, kids feeling badly, whatever it is, kids can really rely on the fact that it will be addressed and kids are seeing that things do happen and that teachers are responding constantly and the difference is that at other schools, teachers might be like, 'yeah, yeah go back to class,' here, we're like, 'let's talk about that.'

Chad and Laurie both acknowledged that, at Hope, they were trying to show students that they're willing to have conversations, not only to stop bullying, but also to cultivate community, and to encourage students to be themselves. They both distinguished Hope from other schools, where presumably, teachers are not willing to engage in conversations, and where the model of dealing with issues is to not really deal with the issues at all. At Hope, teachers said they were willing to talk, to engage students in conversations and to form "connections" with students (Chad, October PD).

The need to form a CC with students continued in the staff's response to a hypothetical

scenario. In this scenario, teachers were asked how they would handle overhearing a student in the hallway use “that’s so gay” to describe the behavior of another student. Billy said that he would have “followed up on it, not just let it go” (October PD). Alicia agreed, and said that she would have “started a conversation with that kid” asking him—“what do you mean it’s gay?” She said that she would have asked him to describe what he meant and that she would have addressed it head on, “with all of the students who were there so that they could hear the conversation.” Lucia agreed, but wondered, “how many times a day” she had to stop this because, for her, it didn’t seem “practically feasible.” In response, Alicia made the case that not starting a conversation was not an option. She said,

... to me it’s like killing cockroaches, when you have a classroom issue like this, whether it’s ‘that’s so gay,’ or ‘you’re a N----’<sup>25</sup>—to me it’s like killing cockroaches in the beginning—you have to hit the nail on the head and address it every single time or it’s going to keep coming back. You see a cockroach run down the hall and you don’t kill it,... you’re going to have a million more—you gotta kill it and knock it every time.... Because guess what, there’s a kid in the hall who is gay and who just heard it and is going to be fucked for the rest of the day....

Terry followed up, saying that “there’s always a way in conversationally” and that it’s important to “actually have a conversation about what he actually means.” Alicia’s point about “killing cockroaches” in the beginning, is an important one. Stopping homophobic, racist, or generally hurtful and offensive language is critical to creating communities that are safe and inclusive. But

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<sup>25</sup> While the N word was used in this conversation, I recognize the power and history of this word and do not think it is appropriate for me to share this term verbatim.

teachers at Hope seemed to recognize the importance of going further than that. Erika reminded teachers that, “how and where it’s done is powerful.” She went on to say,

[h]onestly, I don’t think that if each of us heard [homophobic slurs] ten times a day and stopped them ten times a day and that was the way we chose to address it as a school, that that’s powerful enough.... I don’t believe that it will matter if we stop it ten times a day when we hear it... if it doesn’t become part of the curriculum (October PD).

Erika called for a more unified and expansive effort to create community around GSD: to educate students through the curriculum. Chad agreed that stopping bullying behavior and teaching respect was one area of focus, but that another was acknowledging that students come with “deeply held beliefs.” Chad said that what they were doing was really “[w]orking on what people really have deep down... really working on people’s feelings and understandings.” Laurie astutely asserted that, at Hope, it wasn’t that students were walking around yelling homophobic epithets; it was that it was “more about students’ internal oppression and feelings about gay people—and that they *weren’t* talking about it.” These silences, she explained, had a tremendous impact on everybody in the school and that this was exactly “why it need[ed] to be addressed” throughout the curriculum. The need to give students “tons of education and tons of exposure” was what Erika believed would open students’ minds, but that it “wouldn’t happen right off the bat.” She said, though, that she believed that “they were going to have kids who were really starting to be critical and more human” if they first stopped homophobic language, but then took topics of GSD up in their classrooms. For these teachers, engaging students in difficult conversations, rather than retreating or ignoring the ways in which homophobia, for example, was functioning at Hope, was critical to *till the soil* for FAIR and to create safety and inclusivity.

### **Getting parents on board**

A last strand that became salient was the need to communicate with parents. This strand was mainly driven by fear around what was appropriate to talk to middle school students about with respect to GSD and fear that parents would perceive that teaching about LGBTQ people and history would be teaching about sex. I have explored the ways in which fear operated throughout the teachers' discourse in detail elsewhere (Leonardi, forthcoming); particularly relevant to this discussion is the staff's feedback that they needed support in dealing with "resistant families" (Erika, Scott, pre-PD survey) and "parental concerns" (James, pre-PD survey). In the August PD, the general concern of the staff was not only "how to do this work," but also fear of possible parent resistance. In sharing her expectations of the PD, Alicia said,

I'm hoping that this PD will help us because eventually it's [gender and sexuality is] something we're going to have to talk to our kids about... hopefully you will kind of help us, say, this is a good way, you guys... to have this discussion with your students because there's such a thin line; you don't want to break that line and then have people go home and say... you won't believe what Ms. A was talking about with us today... because next thing you know the parents are coming up here and there's all this drama and...; we want to avoid that so hopefully you'll help us figure it out.

The concern expressed by Alicia motivated many conversations throughout August and October. The need to educate parents about GSD and FAIR, and to invite parents into the conversation was motivated because teachers considered parents as obstacles to the implementation of FAIR. As I mentioned earlier, inviting the whole community into this conversation was an idea that I had as I began my work at Hope. This need was reinforced by the staff and motivated the parent

event that took place in December. In a conversation about how best to start conversations with students, Scott maintained,

But the problem is that, what I was saying, I think part of us--this needs to be a parent education piece too... otherwise it's not- if it's not being backed by... and the parents aren't aware of it and the kids just come home with these 'well guess what they talked about in class today,' and this is everything... and I think it's not really a matter of our school culture or our students per say, it's the bigger thing.... (August PD)

In Scott's concern about parents not "backing" what Hope was trying to do with respect to GSD and FAIR, he called attention to the "bigger thing"—presumably larger societal forces and how they may affect parent perceptions. One way to engage parents to reflect upon these perceptions was to offer a "parent education piece," that is, to "find out where they are and to start from there" (Scott, August PD, October PD). This component of tilling the soil was one that teachers seemed most concerned about.

One challenge of being a researcher at Hope was that I was unable to be there all of the time or get to know everyone equally well. While I did feel a part of the community by the end of the year, I remained, in large part, an outsider. There was no way for me to know the nuances of school days, no way for me to appreciate teachers' subtle, or overt, attempts to disrupt heteronormativity (or not) through their engagement with students, and while I heard many stories, many others were, no doubt, left untold. There was also no way for me to witness forms of resistance or silences that may have persisted throughout the year—with students, teachers, or parents. In the next section, I share two interventions that I planned and helped

facilitate, and on which I collected data. While the effects of these interventions are likely influenced by other experiences that students and parents had at Hope during that year, I do believe that sharing feedback from these experiences, as each was meant to engage the whole community in the effort to disrupt heteronormativity and to prepare for FAIR, can help us understand what it might be like to try and *till the soil* for equity-based policies.

### **Engaging the community**

#### ***The students: “You are such a fag...”***

In December of 2012, Affinity Arts Consulting performed for Hope’s students. To engage students with issues of GSD, specifically as they relate to bullying, AAC created a scene and in it used a strategy called “empty chair.” In this scene, there are four actors and an empty chair. The idea is for the audience to watch the scene once and then consider, if they were in the empty chair, how they would respond, react, change the outcome or engage in the conversation. Audience volunteers (usually one at a time) are chosen to request that the actors start from a particular place. As the scene unfolds, the volunteers occupy the “empty chair” and intervene as they see fit. This scene went something like this: Three friends were having lunch, talking about their band, and how cool they were. A lone student walks by them and sits alone. One of the three tries to engage his friends in a conversation about how “uncool” the lone student is, how he doesn’t like him and how he thinks “he’s all that.” He proceeds to post on his Facebook wall “You are such a fag” and that his jeans are “faggy” and “ghetto.” He shows this post to one of his friends and to the empty chair. The other friends give him a bit of a hard time and tell him that what he did wasn’t cool—but he just blows them off and the scene ends with him saying “whatever.”

This strategy seemed to engage the students. Hands flew up in the air to volunteer to be in the empty chair; there were verbal and physical reactions to use of the word “fag” and also to the word “ghetto.” I could hear students gasp and say things like “that’s mean” and “that’s not okay to say,” but there was also laughter when the word “fag” was mentioned (Field notes, AAC student performance, December). When students began to laugh, Laurie asked what was so funny. A couple of responses included, “well, gay means happy” and “when people say gay or fag, they’re just messing around.” Before volunteers were taken, facilitators asked for some thoughts. Students said that it was not okay to call people names, that it was “rude all over.” They said that it wasn't okay to do things behind people’s backs, or to use derogatory words, but they also said that it happens as Hope. One student shared: “I do get called that, by my brother, and I want to make him stop. It makes me really mad.” Some students shared that “some people” think that being gay is wrong; one student in particular said “it’s not something that people like... people don’t like gay people; they use gay like ‘stupid.’” Another student said, “my mom is okay with it but my dad isn’t.”

Students went up, one after the other, sometimes in pairs, to stand up to the bully, and they employed a variety of strategies. They invited the lone actor into their group, turned their backs on the actor who was bullying, tried to level with him, to get him to understand that treating people like that was not a cool way to be; it was quite impressive to see these students creating ways to engage both the victim and the bully. What followed was a mostly student-led conversation about how we treat one another that included LGBTQ-specific comments. Students had ideas about why people are gay, and others had ideas about why people don't like gay people. One student said that there are reasons that people hide being gay, even at Hope; he said, “people hide it because of how people act and talk about it.” Another student added, “[m]aybe

people who use the word gay are deep down gay themselves.” Also that “being gay doesn’t define who you are; it’s okay to be gay.”

Student responses revealed multiple perspectives on sexuality, and on homosexuality in particular. Laughter seemed to suggest a bit of discomfort with the topic. In fact, in a conversation during this December visit, Alicia shared with me a story from her class, which speaks to this point. Students were writing letters home to parents, and she said to them, to get them started—“Okay, ‘Dear mom and dad, or Dear mom and mom or dad and dad...’” and students began to laugh. Alicia said, ‘What’s so funny? There are families with same sex parents, you know?’” One student said, “yeah, I know... I’m just not used to hearing teachers talk about that.” It is no surprise that students might feel a sense of awkwardness, given the fact that there has been silence in schools with respect to gender and/or sexuality outside of heteronormative frameworks. What students shared with respect to parents or siblings also suggests that they come with ideas and views, in much the same ways that teachers do, and that they are influenced by where they come from (e.g., families, cultural backgrounds, and prior experiences). Students also had ideas about homosexuality being “wrong” and about what “some people” or “people” think—possibly suggesting that larger societal forces were influencing their ideas. The insight that one student had about students hiding being gay because of the normative discourse at the school is very insightful to me and confirms the need for a CC within the student body, a disruption and a healing of the harms caused by heteronormativity, and explicit recognition that being gay, “is okay.”

Throughout this conversation, there were also students who didn’t say anything, who appeared uncomfortable or unwilling to engage. Some students whispered with their friends, and

some continued to giggle or laugh. As Laurie mentioned in an earlier conversation, often what is most damaging are the silences that persist. Were these students exercising resistance in the form of disengagement? Are they a result of students' own religious or personal beliefs about homosexuality? Throughout the year, teachers grappled with students' personal and/ or religious beliefs and how they might both respect their beliefs and at the same time hold them accountable to developing a culture of inclusion and respect. In moving forward in this work, this is something we need to consider. How do we read and work with silences? Are they permissible? Could they keep the soil untilled? How do we allow important space for dissent and hesitation, while educating and encouraging students to engage in and to create safe and inclusive spaces in their schools?

***Student reflections: "If we talk about it then..."***

In the follow-up questionnaires, students were asked, "Do you think that yesterday's performance and the topics discussed are important to talk about at school?" Student responses indicated that they did, indeed, believe these topics were important: 72% of students answered "yes"; 21% said "maybe"; and 7% said "no." Students were also asked to explain their answers. Among those responses, I noted salient themes such as "Discussion as a way to end bullying," and "Education: It's important to learn about this now."

Students admitted that "homosexuality is something that people use [at Hope] to tease" people about, and that talking about this is a way to "stop the problem." Throughout this theme, students shared that there needed to be discussions about these topics as a way to end bullying. For the most part, students' responses were focused on general bullying, though several students spoke specifically about homosexuality; one student, bringing the two together, said, "it is vital

to discuss homosexual bullying especially in middle school.” This student’s survey response seems to follow the literature on homophobic bullying and the need to address it in schools, particularly middle schools. GLSEN’s 2007 report on the experiences of LGBT middle school students suggests that, “school is not a safe place.” Ninety-one percent of students heard the word “gay” used in a negative way and eighty-two percent heard homophobic remarks. Sixty-six percent heard negative comments about gender expression. Middle school teachers, for the most part, often failed to address this language. This is important to note, given that many students at Hope felt as though talking about it would “stop it from happening” or at least “limit bullying.” Students also suggested that talking about the topics in the performance would help them “find out what’s really going on” and “fix the problem.” In their responses, students seemed to indicate the various beneficial layers that having conversations might have. They indicated the need to stop bullying, but they also recognized that bullying is a product of a larger problem, perhaps homophobia, as homosexuality was used as a way to tease. They further recognized the power of language and the damage that it can do in school spaces, particularly for students who might be questioning or might identify as LGBTQ. Ultimately, students suggested that talking about these topics would help the school to “create a safe environment for students,” essentially, *till the soil*—not only for FAIR, but for students to feel affirmed.

A second theme that emerged in student survey responses was the need to learn about “this” now. Students acknowledged that they should be learning about these topics “as soon as possible”; however, the controversial nature of GSD was not lost on many of them. They admitted, “the topic of the scene is sensitive to a lot of people”; some even said that it might “make people uncomfortable” or that “someone might take it the wrong way,” but most maintained, “it is important to talk about. To gain knowledge on the topic.” The fact that they

recognized the controversial nature of these discussions seems to suggest that they already understood that larger societal forces were at play. They maintained, however, that there was a need to create a CC, even in all of the messiness that it may evoke. It is interesting and important to me that they went beyond the anti-bullying narrative of removing or punishing the bully and called, instead, for the need to talk and to learn about these topics.

Student interviews<sup>26</sup> revealed similar themes. While in interviews I talked with students about overall safety, bullying, and diversity, in my analyses I focused mainly on the following questions related to GSD, and how students felt about talking about these topics at school:

- I know that you all have talked a lot about LGBTQ students and topics. Tell me what stands out to you about those discussions.
- Is this something new for you to discuss? Do you think it's important to talk about?

That students felt like talking about issues of GSD was clear throughout almost all of the interviews. In their responses, two themes emerged: that having conversations decreased homophobic bullying and that these conversations were important for students at Hope who might identify as LGBTQ. Students believed that having educative conversations helped with bullying and homophobia. Luna shared,

I think it's good because I think it's cutting out some of that [homophobic bullying] because I think because people just say that because they don't know what it is. The more information that you know the less you're going to do things like that; usually kids doing things like that don't really understand.

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<sup>26</sup> Again, I interviewed 13 students. These students were chosen by teachers and the principal, based on criteria that I sent to them about students who they thought felt varying levels of safety at Hope.

Eddy admitted that talking about LGBTQ people and topics at first “felt weird”; he said that “everybody was like why are they saying that stuff?” Now, he said, since “they talk about it a lot, everybody’s gotten used to it and now everybody’s fine with it” and that “it doesn’t make a difference.” Eddy went on to say that he thinks that there might be a gay or lesbian person at Hope and that “no one cares, they’re still friends with them and everything... nobody gets bullied for that stuff now.” Eddy acknowledged that at first, it was “weird,” presumably given the fact that it’s not a typical discussion to have in schools, but he also shared that “everybody’s gotten used to it”—which seems to suggest that conversations mattered in normalizing GSD, or at least in encouraging students to be “fine with it.”

Throughout the interviews, when I initially said that I knew students at Hope talked about LGBTQ students and topics (prompted at least in part by the PD), students’ reactions suggested that they knew how unique this was and they responded with a sense of pride. “Oh, yeah, yeah” or “Yes! We do!” or “oh yeah, definitely!” were common replies. When I asked students what stood out to them about these conversations, a main theme reflected the historical silence around these topics, similar to Eddy’s sentiment above. Mark, a 6<sup>th</sup> grader, said “‘cause at my old school we would never have those discussions... that’s what stands out to me, that we actually have those discussions.” Another 6<sup>th</sup> grade student, Jan, added that at her old school, they could never talk about it “unless something happened” and that they never talked about it “in depth... not like this.” Jan’s response suggests that talking about gender and sexuality was only as a reaction to something “happening.” The conversations, I’m assuming, while not “in depth”—were more focused on stopping bullying behavior, not on normalizing GSD. Jan also said “I think that it doesn’t matter how you talk about it, but it matters that you talk about it.” The call, here, that Jan made for “talking about it” seems to suggest that the depth to which these conversations

happened at Hope was meaningful, that they went beyond “things happening” and that they were more educative. Cherie, a 7<sup>th</sup> grader, shared a similar experience; she said that at her old school they had conversations, but more about bullying, and that her school “was like 'kids will be kids' which was kind of... bad.... She went on to explain that teachers at Hope considered it “a serious issue.” She said, “I think the fact that they picked up on that... it’s really good that they picked up on that kind of thing.” Students’ recognition of teachers’ attention to issues of GSD is important. Whereas in the GLSEN data, students reported that teachers did not respond to homophobic bullying or harmful language, students at Hope seemed to realize that teachers at their school cared about these issues and were supportive. The GLSEN (2007) report also makes it clear that when students feel that there are supportive staff members, they also report more positive schools climates.

The second theme suggested that students were concerned about their LGBTQ peers. Students said that talking about it might make it safer for students to “be themselves” because “it would be hard if they were keeping it in” (Alan). Luna shared:

So like, when we talk about it, I think it's really good because it kind of cuts out, like, those words that people use... and like, they should be able to express [their sexuality] because if they are [gay], they should be able to express that; they shouldn't have to hold that in and feel scared that they're going to be bullied.

One 7<sup>th</sup> grade student, who identified as gay, and who was out to some students at Hope, said that these conversations were “very... comforting” to him; he continued, “I mean, no matter who you are, you are safe here.”

There was one negative case in these data. Alan, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student, provided some particularly important insights. Reflecting on a group of LGBTQ adults who came to the school

to do a presentation, Alan said that it seemed that the students were positioned as homophobic and that this wasn't a great strategy. Regarding the importance of these topics at school, Alan said that it was "half and half"; he said:

Most of the kids at our school are really smart and stuff and so it [being homophobic] would never cross their minds until it's brought up at school; so some of the time the kids who are homophobic, it helps them be less, but all the kids who aren't it makes them like 'oh I never thought of it that way, never even thought about it that way.'

Alan's reflection here is so critical to the successful implementation of a bill like FAIR and to school safety for LGBTQ students overall. If we position students as homophobic, or LGBTQ topics and people as Other, or as something to remedy, then not only will kids "not want to come out," as Alan also pointed out, but we will also be sending a message that, rather than disrupting heteronormative ideals, reinforces them.

Consistent with the idea of a CC, some students admitted that these conversations were not easy to have; yet, student data, overall, revealed a desire to talk and to be educated about GSD, and that doing so would make their school safer. What was also revealed is that in making LGBTQ people and topics intelligible, some students were able to think past the anti-bullying narrative and to consider these issues as a necessary part of school and everyday life; they were even aware of how their own classmates might be affected. Talking to students, encouraging them to talk to one another, to grapple with new information, as well as supporting students who may have a hard time in these discussions is all part of *tilling the soil*. While these data represent only what students said, and cannot necessarily be stretched over into how they acted or what they did, their ideas are important to consider as teachers try to navigate the complexities of implementing a bill like FAIR.

Although it is difficult to determine effects caused by the interventions I initiated, it is worth considering connections. In October, the principal shared that some students used “that’s so gay” and that even mentioning “gay” without laughter or distaste was nearly impossible (email exchange, September 8, 2012). Teachers reported, in October PD, a bullying incident and also that students were “homophobic.” Throughout the year, along with these interventions, teachers shared with me that they addressed homophobic bullying, that they introduced GSD topics into the curriculum, and that they made the conversation about GSD explicit. By the end of the year, four students had “come out;” an “Allies” group was started; there were signs hung around the school that said: “We are gay and we are very much in love” above same-gendered figures. On an end-of-the-year survey, 47% of students “strongly agreed” to being “comfortable talking about issues of identity such as sexual orientation” when pre-survey results reported only 16%. This is an important difference, even if it is just that students report being more comfortable with topics of GSD. Eleven percent of students reported “never” having conversations about sexual orientation at the end of the year, when pre-survey results reported 40%. On the end-of-the-year survey, students were also asked to respond to the following: “My school is a safe place for students who identify as gay or lesbian. Thirty-three percent “strongly agreed” and 43% “agreed.” Seventeen-percent of students “disagreed,” and 7% “strongly disagreed.” (See appendix E for comparisons on these items.) These findings suggest that there were changes associated with the PD and that these changes were in a positive direction. They suggest to educators, policy-makers and researchers what it might take to *till the soil*: to foreground the relationship between schools and society and to understand the complexities of developing a school community that is working toward healing the harms caused by heteronormativity.

*The parents: Troubling ideas of safety*

In December, parents and families of Hope were invited, via email, to attend a parent meeting/ workshop, the focus of which was broadly described as school culture and student safety, but specifically focused on LGBTQ youth in schools and new legislation (FAIR and Seth’s Law).<sup>27</sup> The evening started with my presentation entitled “Creating safety and inclusivity in our school and in our classrooms.” During this presentation, I asked participants to engage with the question of what it means to be “safe.” Consistent with Hope’s mission, as well as with my ideas and beliefs about creating schools in which all students are affirmed, the focus of this evening was one intentionally designed to move an understanding of safety beyond anti-bullying discourse and toward a discourse of affirmation and respect for GSD. I introduced and explained both FAIR and Seth’s Law, then briefly talked through heteronormativity and the gender binary and their dangerous effects on students in schools; further, I asked attendees to consider the ways that language and discourse function in school contexts (systematic inclusion and systematic exclusion<sup>28</sup>), as well as in society, as I asked them to think about how their own language, or that which circulates in society-at-large, serves to perpetuate dangerous stereotypes. I ended with suggestions of actionable steps (Gay Straight Alliances, inclusive curriculum, and supportive school personnel) that can be taken to create safer, more inclusive spaces for LGBTQ students. I made a point to focus on the culture of Hope and how critical it was that for community members “to create a *culture* of safety and inclusivity, we must all work together, challenge our assumptions, come with questions instead of judgments, and create space for members of our

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<sup>27</sup> The invitation and explanation of the evening can be found in Appendix D.

<sup>28</sup> Briefly, systematic inclusion points to the ways in which negative or false information about homosexuality is introduced in schools as a pathology or deviant behavior; systematic exclusion is the process whereby positive role models, messages, and images about LGBTQ people are publicly silenced in schools (Friend, 1993).

community to feel safe and secure to be themselves” (Powerpoint slide, Parent event). A brief discussion followed this presentation, and then AAC stepped in to contextualize the discussion and to challenge parents to start talking to one another, to engage in their own Culture of Conversation.

The scene that AAC planned for the parents centered on gender identity. Set at a soccer game, parents watched their kids play and spoke about “J.D.”—a student who was biologically male, but who was beginning to identify more as female. J.D. went to school a few days before dressed in “girl” clothing and was met with resistance from other students and from parents. One parent at this soccer game, Alex, did not let the conversation go, blaming J.D.’s gender expression on bad parenting, an absent father, and having no role models. He was also concerned that J.D.’s gender expression was going to confuse other kids who were “too young” to have to think about a friend who was “confused.” The scene stopped and parents in the audience got to interact with the actors, asking questions, challenging their responses to the situation, and even scolding Alex for his insensitivity. After about ten minutes, actors got out of their roles, and the conversation turned more generally to GSD and ways to support all students to be themselves.

***Parent reflections: Everyone has to be on board***

Salient themes in parent responses on both surveys and interviews included the need for education around issues of GSD in schools and the importance of creating a CC throughout the school community, even though it may not be easy. Parents also identified the relationship between school and society and the need to educate students, parents, and teachers to combat dangerous normative ideals around issues of sexuality and gender. Several parents also shared

how their attitudes were affected by the intervention. And several shared concerns about the appropriateness of having conversations about GSD at school.

In the follow-up questionnaires, parents were asked, “Do you think it’s important for schools to introduce issues of gender and sexual diversity? Please explain.” Of the approximately 60 attendees<sup>29</sup> at this evening, 45 of them consented to be in this study and filled out questionnaires. Forty-two parents and/or family members answered this question; ninety-three percent (39 participants) said “yes,” this is important (several said “absolutely” or “definitely”). In their brief explanations, six participants who answered “yes” elaborated beyond one or two words of support. One parent, Kate, reflecting on the new perspectives that she gained in the presentation, said:

When asked about identifying authors as gay, my initial reaction was ‘no,’ because it should be a non-issue. But I came to realize that we need to climb the cultural mountain before it becomes a non-issue.

In our interview, Kate continued to talk about how this part of the presentation “came across loud and clear” and that it “really shifted” her focus. She said,

hopefully we can educate and normalize it [gender and sexual diversity] -- and then 20, 30, 40 years down the road, we won't have to talk about the differences between people and we can, you know... because everyone's sort of the same... that really came across loud and clear and really shifted my lens.

Two other participants, on their questionnaires, said that the presentation strengthened their beliefs about how important it is to have these conversations at school. One participant admitted,

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<sup>29</sup> The population at Hope and the people who attended the parent meeting may be a select group and not representative of the public as a whole and maybe not of parents at Hope. They may have come because they cared about and were interested in the topic; they may also have come because, for attending this event, they received parent volunteer hours.

I never really thought about it, but I think it is important to expose them in a positive way before they get exposed negatively.

This desire to “expose” students to GSD in a “positive,” educative way was something shared by parents throughout my interviews as well, though all of the parents that I interviewed called for the whole community to be educated. Several parents admitted and understood that addressing these topics in school communities is “not easy” and may leave some parents feeling afraid, but maintained that “it’s a disservice not to talk about this,” that “this is the reality, not my philosophy or my opinion” (Claire), and that “this can’t be denied” (Kim, James and Edie). Acknowledging the discomfort that a CC may evoke, but also the importance that it serves, Claire shared how she felt the evening of the event:

I think there's something really exciting about this; I mean, in the room that night, even though it was a self-selected group, it was a very diverse group and I felt like there was a little bit, it was a little dangerous in there, but I was like this is really cool. I'm uncomfortable, but this is really good.

Both Kate and Kim made the case that when it comes to topics of GSD, schools really “matter” (Wells et al, 2004). Teachers have to be on board to create an environment of trust; parents “have to be educated” because they come with “too many biases” (Kate) and teachers have to keep kids safe “no matter how parents feel or what they say...; they know what it takes to protect the children” (Kim). In an interview with parents of a student at Hope who had recently come out, his mother shared “they [teachers] have to be conscious, so there needs to be consciousness raising for the teachers, for the parents, and for the kids-- and the administration—education.”

His father followed, “education is the medicine for everything out there.” Echoing this claim, Claire offered,

I think it starts with leadership and I think it then trickles down to teachers and students, and I mean, the parent body, at least in the public schools has never been a main um, I mean, there are plenty of volunteer parents, but I think making this available for parents is really so smart—

Noting the importance of the “school, home, community, connection” and that it “takes a village to raise a kid,” Kim agreed that

a lot of this is education... informing parents, educating the children, um, a lot of workshops, interactive types of things. Education is the biggest thing of all. You can't really achieve what you want to achieve to the best of your ability if you don't know—even if you have a lot of intuition....

Confirming the need to a Community Development model, parents recognized that in order to create schools as safe and affirming places with respect to GSD, in order to *till the soil*, conversations and support had to extend beyond teachers, to students and to the parent community.

I asked participants what could be done to get everyone on board, so that experiences like the one that evening were not just for parents who were, as Claire put it, “drinking the Kool-Aid.” Claire’s idea to engage the whole community was consistent with the Community Development model that we were trying to create, but she went a step further, suggesting that people who show up to these events need to

be part of an educational body... if everybody goes out, kind of a Facebook notion of this is what we're doing. It's not about your belief or feeling, it's about reality and we want our kids to feel safe and we want the kids in the classrooms that are with our kids to feel safe.

Claire also recognized the relationship between schools and society, asserting that not talking about GSD in schools only perpetuates “much of what we have to put up with” in society-at-large, which she said was “really antiquated and antithetical to education.”

While a majority of participants reported the need and importance for these conversations with youth to happen at school, seven percent (3 participants) said that they were “unsure.” One mentioned, “I have mixed feelings and still do. I think it's very valuable in high school. I think it's a harder question in younger grades with respect to sexuality in particular.” This theme was not one that was salient in questionnaire data, nor in interview transcripts, though one participant, Kim, provided different insight. In our interview, I asked Kim how she felt about including LGBTQ people and history in the curriculum. She responded,

It's interesting that you say that because I actually got an unsolicited phone call from one of the parents who was at the meeting and the parent wasn't happy about the, um, workshop and what you guys were doing -- and he was like, ‘how did you feel about it’ because I think he got the wrong impression from what I was saying that evening. I told him that I thought that the workshop was amazing; I told everyone at work about it....

I feel like some of the parents were a little upset because they just dance around it and are afraid to bring this up with their kids and they're waiting for children to bring it up to

them and they're like, 'oh they're ready now,' but you know, then the fact that you're doing this in the school before they could even speak to their kids, they're like, 'wait, hold on...' like 'no, you're not supposed to... wait-- I'm the parent. I'm supposed to do this first, or... it may be if I never talk about it then my kid would never experience it.'

I followed up by asking Kim if she thought that there would be resistance from parents if LGBTQ topics and people were included in the curriculum. She replied, "I do... I do." I asked if she thought that the majority of parents at Hope were okay or not okay with the workshop; she said, "not ok." Given questionnaire data on a fixed response item meant to gauge participants' interest, both before and after the workshop, in issues of gender and sexuality in schools, Kim's response surprised me. Fifty-six percent of parents (25) reported being interested prior to attending. These participants also reported remaining interested after attending. Forty-seven percent (21) were "neither interested or disinterested." Of these 21 participants, 17 reported being interested after attending, and all but one participant thought that it was "important for schools to introduce issues of gender and sexual diversity." This one participant did not reject inclusion of these topics, but said that this conversation "should start at home. Not only the school's job."

Not one participant said that these conversations should not take place in schools. Kim went on to say that parents wanted "a say" in what was happening at school and the fact that Laurie, the principal, informed them that this was happening might have threatened the parents in some way. I then mentioned, "but it's now a law!" and Kim's response was an almost too-perfect call for *tilling the soil*:

parents don't care about that or see that, when it comes to 'my child' and... forget the government, forget the laws, everything like that... this is what I choose as a parent and you're not going to do this-- so I don't know....

I'm still sitting with Kim's response. There is really no way to know how many parents were not "okay" with the conversations about GSD and curricular inclusion of LGBTQ people and topics throughout the year; from what we knew, only one parent had an issue and made that issue known. So, Kim's response leaves me with questions similar to ones that I have around student resistance and silence. If there were parents who did not agree with this inclusion, or who had problems with Hope's mission, what does it mean that we didn't hear from them? What can these silences teach us? How do we *till the soil* with parents and students who remain silent, who disengage, who may not actively resist a policy like FAIR, but who don't actively support it? Did Hope's foregrounding of FAIR and their proactive stance with all stakeholders silence potential resistance? How do we invite resistance for the sake of creating a CC and for healing heteronormative school contexts? These are important questions to hold moving forward in this effort. Hope, at least somewhat, was fertile ground. There is, no doubt, ground that is a lot less fertile for Fair's implementation, where resistance and/or silence will trouble efforts to *till the soil*. As teachers, scholars, and researchers interested in this effort, we have to continue to find ways to engage communities in constructive conversations.

Throughout the data collected from parents, what seems to have emerged is the need and desire for a Community Development model, one that is foregrounded in a CC, and one that, I argue, helped *till the soil* for FAIR at Hope Academy. As Kim mentioned, parents tend to disregard laws that are aimed at compelling them to do what they do not want to do (DuBois, 1935); attending to the opinions and feelings of parents is critical to the success of equity-minded

policies and to the soil being tilled. After all, when we talk about this relationship between schools and society, and the need to consider the tensions therein, we have to also consider who “society” is--; likely, society includes many parents of students in our schools. To *not* include them in the conversation is to pretend that the tension in this relationship isn’t centrally located in *their* opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. By engaging parents in educative and consciousness-raising conversations about GSD, and supporting them to grapple with what might, in fact, “scare them,” LGBTQ people and topics became part of the culture, part of what parents came to expect throughout the year. Sharing with them insights into the experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools, while perhaps not garnering full support, certainly helped, as the questionnaire data suggested, change their attitudes about the importance of having discussions about GSD in schools.

### **Conclusion**

In a post-PD interview in August, Erika explicitly said that the law doesn’t matter, that there are plenty of laws that exist that no one follows, especially laws that go against what the parents think is “right.” Throughout August and October, while other teachers didn’t say this outright, the law didn’t seem to matter to them either; it didn’t quell their fear and it didn’t provide the support needed for implementation. While equity-focused laws are critical to support and honor all students, the mere passage of them is not enough. Just as “school desegregation policy should never have been expected to overcome the obstacles confronting it in American society” (Wells, 1997), we cannot expect FAIR to be implemented in schools, largely influenced by society-at-large, that are, in many cases, “virtual cauldrons of homophobic sentiment” (Smith, 1993, p. 114). As noted by desegregation scholars, there are deeply held beliefs, prejudices, and

biases that serve as barriers to the successful implementation of these laws. Studying the relationship between policy and practice requires that we also study the relationship between schools and society. This is especially true for policies that “go against the grain of U.S. society—when, for instance, they challenge long-held assumptions about race, class, student ability...” or heteronormative ideals (Wells, et al, 2004, p. 93). Not only will this focus allow us to better understand the success and failure of these policies, it will also help us to understand how best to support these policies through implementation.

At Hope Academy, during the 2012-2013 school year, we foregrounded the important relationship between schools and society, considered the influence that dangerous heteronormative ideologies have in school contexts, and acknowledged that FAIR itself may not be enough. We recognized that the social, cultural and historical belief systems of teachers, parents, and students needed to be acknowledged, affirmed, and sometimes challenged, and through a Community Development model, aimed to create a Culture of Conversation, in which all stakeholders were involved. As with *Brown* and desegregation legislation, FAIR *was set up to land in soil not tilled*. *Tilling the soil* to prepare Hope for this policy, involved breaking the silence around GSD; it involved educating, supporting, and facilitating discussions with all stakeholders. It appears that the work done throughout this school year had a positive impact on the community, at least in their willingness to engage in conversations and in their recognition that conversations are important to have. Making intelligible a people, whether physically, as in the case with *Brown*, or discursively, as in the case of FAIR, involves sense-making; it involves a process of self-reflection, vulnerability—and a willingness to engage, perhaps at the risk of discomfort, and even more, growing pains. Giving school communities the chance to make sense—together—gives that community the chance to create a culture that is maybe not wholly

grounded in support of a policy like FAIR, but at least a culture that is talking to one another about the policy—holding each other accountable, and this matters for the future of schools as safe and inclusive spaces for all of our students.

Wells et al (2004) name the struggle against larger societal forces that work against schools being equitable spaces as “never-ending”; they say that this struggle must be “acknowledged as an important act of human agency amid imposing social structures of inequality and oppression” (p. 93). They assert that the history of our country has and continues to prevent lived experiences in schools that promote “desegregation and racial equality and integration more broadly”; they argue, however, that “there are spaces where this occurs and where meaningful experiences transform people’s lives” (p. 93). There is no doubt in my mind, or heart, that what the principal, teachers, parents, and students at Hope created during this year transformed people’s lives. There is also no doubt that it was hard work. The staff at Hope, through their fear, confusion, own processes around GSD, and questions about “how to do this” with middle school students, to me, represent an effort that is a start, at least, to *tilling the soil* for safety and inclusivity—and for policies like FAIR. The community at Hope and the work they did represent a small piece of a larger and important effort that needs to continue with respect to healing the harms caused by heteronormativity. Lastly, Wells et al (2004), contend, “[t]he struggle is never over, and these experiences and their larger contexts are what educational researchers must capture” (p. 93). I hope that on some level, this study contributed to that effort.

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## **Navigating the relationship between policy and practice: Competing discourses of fear and care in teachers' sense making about the FAIR Education Act**

I'm hoping that this PD [professional development] will help us because eventually it's [gender and sexuality is] something we're going to have to talk to our kids about... hopefully you will kind of help us, say, this is a good way, you guys... to have this discussion with your students because there's such a thin line, you don't want to break that line and then have people go home and say... you won't believe what Ms. A was talking about with us today... because next thing you know the parents are coming up here and there's all this drama and...; we want to avoid that so hopefully you'll help us figure it out. (Alicia, August PD)

### **Introduction**

Some recent scholarship in education has focused on heteronormativity<sup>30</sup> and the pervasive stronghold that it has on our schools—on classrooms and the norms within and on the teachers who are responsible for keeping all children safe (i.e. Blackburn, 2010; Britzman, 1995; Dessell, 2010; Garcia& Slesaranksy-Poe, 2010; Kumashiro, 2001; Meyer, 2008). While teachers may be portrayed in the media as the usual suspects in everything that is wrong with schools and education (e.g., *Waiting for Superman*), in the case of heteronormativity and the ways in which its associated effects harm our students, I propose that teachers are not necessarily “what’s wrong.” Teachers should not be the only ones responsible for taking on the challenge to disrupt

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dangerous social practices. Teachers, alone, cannot solve the social ills that have long plagued this country (e.g., racism, homophobia) (Anyon, 2005; Stuart-Wells, 1997). Even when there are policies in place, the focus of which are on rectifying, or healing, these social woes (e.g., desegregation legislation, FAIR Education Act), teachers often are left to battle histories and sociopolitical contexts, in the form of long-standing social norms, normative discourses, student and parent push-back and outright resistance, and even sometimes themselves and their deeply held beliefs about what is “right” or what is “normal.”

Teachers do, however, have the responsibility to do what they can to disrupt and challenge heteronormativity, which, among other things, includes being educated on issues of gender and sexual diversity (GSD), examining their own biases and assumptions related to GSD, and normalizing GSD by making it a part of their curriculum while going beyond mere inclusion of LGBTQ<sup>31</sup> authors and history. Essential to the healing of heteronormative school environments is that teachers challenge compulsory heterosexuality, de-normalize heterosexual relationships, actively support gender variant students and their peers, and, most importantly, challenge their students to think about and critique the ways in which heterosexuality is constructed as normal (Britzman, 1995; Butler, 1990; Pascoe, 2012). This is a lot—and teachers need support.

Teacher education programs have been remiss when it comes to preparing pre-service teachers around issues of GSD (i.e. Jennings, 2007; Meyer, 2008; Quinn & Meiners, 2011). Gender and sexuality are the topics least likely to be addressed in diversity-related teacher education courses, where the majority of attention is focused on race/ethnicity, special needs, and language diversity (Jennings, 2007). The absence of topics related to GSD gives teachers the

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message that these issues are not important, are not theirs to address, and are not an integral part of what it means to be a teacher. This dangerous silence leaves teachers questioning what their responsibilities are, and whether they should remain neutral on issues that are moral or political, or that engage “values” (Clark & Blackburn, 2009). More needs to be done to support teachers, both pre- and in-service, to understand the complexities of GSD and student experiences, and to recognize their own important role in creating schools that are affirming for all of their students. Given the lack of pre-service support, professional development (PD) opportunities need to be in place for teachers who are in the field now.

We do not yet know enough about what happens when teachers are faced with the challenge to disrupt heteronormativity in their schools and classrooms, nor do we know enough about how they make sense of their roles in doing so, especially when they are mandated to do so by law. While some empirical studies have focused on what happens when teachers receive PD or pre-service teacher education related to GSD, how their attitudes change, what their perceived or actual behaviors may be, and what new knowledge they attained (e.g., Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Dessel, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Payne & Smith, 2010; Riggs, et al, 2010; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2010), in this study, I moved a little closer in, and focused on what happens when teachers are given the opportunity to make sense of their roles, through conversations and dialogue, specifically in the context of the passage of the Fair, Accurate, Inclusive, and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act. FAIR was passed in California on April 14, 2011; it prohibits the adoption of discriminatory curriculum materials and amends the Education Code to include lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Americans, people with disabilities, and Pacific Islanders in the social sciences curriculum. The law took effect on January 1, 2012 (Penan, 2013). The analyses presented in this article focus on the following research questions: What

themes arise in teachers' conversations about their roles in the implementation of the FAIR Education Act? What do these conversations reveal about teachers' perceptions and feelings about gender and sexual diversity, more generally, in schools?

The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between large-scale social discourses and local, school discourses as it plays out in conversations about gender and sexuality with and among teachers. To begin, I will explain my theoretical orientation, which, informed by concepts of discourse, silence and power, is grounded in discursive theories of gender and sexuality. As discourse is central to this article, to the lived experiences of LGBTQ people, both throughout history as well as today, I will then discuss the current sociopolitical climate and normative discourses as they relate to gender and sexuality, with particular attention to the discourse around gender and sexuality in schools; understanding these discursive practices is central to my analyses. I will briefly explain the PD that I created and delivered, as this programming was developed from a review of the literature on PD for teachers that focused on gender and sexuality and was heavily grounded in conversations and dialogue. Consistent with my focus on discourse and dialogue, recorded and transcribed PD conversations were my primary data sources. In my analyses, I will discuss the ways in which fear and care—themes that became salient using an inductive approach to data analysis—functioned throughout my data, and how deductive codes of discourse, power, and silence (Foucault 1977, 1980, 1983, 1987, 2001; Butler 1990, 1991, 1999, 2004, 2006) helped me to understand the relationship between a powerful fear discourse, alive and well in our current sociopolitical climate, and the narratives of caring teachers about what it means to be a teacher. I argue that examining the relationship between large- and small-scale discourses provides key insights into the ways in

which teachers make sense of policies that are meant to shift sociopolitical paradigms, and their roles and responsibilities in the implementation of such policies. Ultimately, I argue that these policies are not enough and that we, as researchers, policy-makers, and teacher educators, need to focus on how to support teachers through their fear and into action; at the same time, we must work to shift larger, oppressive social and political discourses, especially as they relate to, and affect, our schools.

### **Theoretical Orientation: Discourse, Silence, and Power**

Historically, public schools in the United States have ignored LGBTQ people and history, resulting in palpable silences within formal curriculum. These silences are, in Foucault's (1978) words, "an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses" (p. 27). Central to my theoretical orientation is the assumption that all aspects of school—policies, pedagogy, curriculum, social norms—"are constructed through discourses that are informed and embedded within power relations that benefit some individuals and groups more than others" (Dutro & Selland, 2012, p. 342). The denial of GSD has long served not only to perpetuate the unequal treatment of individuals in schools, but also has sent the loud and clear message that inclusion is inappropriate, unnecessary, even something that should be avoided. The exclusion of GSD from the curriculum serves as a key instance of how silence functions to perpetuate powerful, normative discourses (Foucault, 1987).

The silence, in fact, has been a reaction to and has even bolstered, the dominant (hetero)normative discourse about what is appropriate in school settings. Hade (1997) contends that silence operates as "oxygen" in allowing assumptions of inferiority to go unquestioned, or taken for granted. Teachers' silence with respect to LGBTQ people in classrooms allows these

assumptions to continue. Foucault (1990) maintains that silencing with respect to sexuality in general is not an accident, but is “achieved through the careful and continual production and monitoring—by the self and by others—of speech acts” (Dalley & Campbell, 2006, p. 12).

Breaking the silence in schools involves teachers examining their own biases, as well as battling dominant normative discourses about what is “normal,” acceptable, and/or appropriate in the context of school.

According to Foucault (1977), discourse is defined as the production of knowledge through language. Understood as much more than the words that we use, discourse describes language and practice that constructs the topics, objects, and categories of our knowledge (p. 49). Hall (2001) elaborates on Foucault’s explanation of discourse, explaining,

It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences just how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others. Just as a discourse ‘rules in’ certain ways of talking about a topic, defining an acceptable and intelligible way to talk, write, or conduct oneself, so also, by definition, it ‘rules out’, limits and restricts other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the topic or constructing knowledge about it. (p. 72)

Thus, discourses shape “hierarchies for the institutional categorization and treatment of people” through “constructions of ‘truths’ about the social and natural world” (Luke, 1995-96, p. 8).

These taken-for-granted truths become institutionalized, forming the categories and definitions that serve to govern populations and to dictate rules of surveillance (Foucault, 1977). These “regimes of truth” function not only through large-scale social discourses, but also through local politics (Gore, 1993). Communities “both [resist] and [become] complicit in their moral

regulation” (Luke, 1995-96, p. 9) engaging in discourse in unique ways and often internalizing these very discourses. Schools and classrooms serve as local contexts where normative discourses are taken up, where they enforce (often invisible) disciplinary power (e.g., heteronormativity), and where they are also resisted. While discourse transmits, produces, and reinforces power, “it also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart” thus, “discourse can serve as a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1998, pp. 100-1).

In schools, heteronormative discourse impacts both gender identity and sexual identity. Butler’s (1990) notion of the “heterosexual matrix” as “an assemblage of norms that serves the particular end of producing subjects whose gender/sex/desire all *cohere* in certain ways” (italics in original, Chambers and Carver, 2008, p. 144) seems to describe what is most common in schools and classrooms (GLSEN, 2011; Kumashiro, 2002; Meyer, 2010; Tollefson, 2010). In excluding information about the sexual identities of canonical authors from the curriculum, for example, schools function to both privilege certain groups and identities and to marginalize others and “legitimize this social order by couching it in the language of ‘normalcy’ and ‘common sense’” (i.e., not naming sexuality leaves heterosexuality as the unspoken assumption) (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 45). The ways in which schools perpetuate inequity through heteronormative discursive practices, through historically and culturally specific sets of rules, have major implications for all students, particularly for LGBTQ students. While many of our LGBTQ youth are resilient and resistant, refusing oppressive narratives (Cruz, 2011), it is necessary that schools, as public institutions, resist—and disrupt, these narratives as well. Below, I explore the current sociopolitical context and normative discourse related to gender and sexuality, particularly with respect to students in schools and to the FAIR Education Act.

### **Gender and sexual diversity in schools: Normative discourses of fear and resistance**

To understand how teachers are making sense of FAIR and of their responsibilities to implement this new law, a law that attempts to shift a climate of silence around GSD, it is important to understand the current sociopolitical context, as well as the normative discourses around GSD, particularly in schools.

Connected with a climate of general resistance to FAIR (i.e., Stop SB 48), parents, for example, may see no place for LGBTQ history in our schools. According to Lisa Richardson, one of the founding members of Equality In Education Orange County and a second grade teacher in the Capistrano Unified School District, parents say “it’s offensive to people who disagree with that ‘lifestyle’ and it’s inappropriate and doesn’t belong in our schools” (Penan, 2013). Further, parents are concerned that “LGBT historical figures [can] only be portrayed in a positive light and that you can’t say anything negative about people in the LGBT community” (Penan, 2013). This resistance is further instantiated in a sort of anxiety that seems meant to create a “moral panic.” Reverend Louis Sheldon, of the Traditional Values Coalition, describes parents’ rights as being “trampled on” by “liberals and the state Legislature” and calls for “people of California to weigh in and decide if they want pro-homosexual content in their child’s textbooks” (Young, 2011). Randy Thomasson, president of SaveCalifornia.com goes on to warn:

California government schools are no longer morally safe for impressionable children....

Because of the raft of sexual indoctrination laws already in force, which promote homosexuality, bisexuality and transsexuality under the guise of discrimination and

harassment, the social engineers are having their way with more than six million boys and girls. (Young, 2011)

Thomasson cites, on SaveCalifornia.com, “10 bad laws + 10 big concerns” and suggests that the sum equals “20 reasons to intervene.” Explaining that “the government (public) school system” was founded by “atheist progressive John Dewey, who promoted secular humanism and ridiculed moral absolutes and traditional religion,” Thomasson warns that these schools are “unsafe place[s] to send children” (<https://savecalifornia.com/rescue-your-child.html>). These schools, he explains, “continue to promote Dewey’s immoral agenda to captivate young, impressionable minds.” In a handy PDF<sup>32</sup> entitled “10 public-school ‘LGBT’ indoctrination laws,” he outlines all of the laws that are meant to make schools safer and more affirming for students and teachers though suggests visiting RescueYourChild.com for details of these laws and how they present danger to students. In Thomasson’s “final plea” to Governor Jerry Brown, written on July 5, 2011, nine days before Brown signed the bill into law, he uses fear rhetoric, calling FAIR a “brash attack on children's innocence,” “the most in-your-face brainwashing yet” explaining that the law would mandate that children learn “falsehoods-- that homosexuality is biological, when it isn't, or healthy, when it's not.” He goes on to explicitly link FAIR and the inclusion of LGBT history and people to sex and what people do “in the bedroom.”

This fear narrative is supported by many other organizations, such as the Protect Kids Foundation, The Campaign for Children and Families, Concerned Parents United, Keeping Families Together, the titles of which all share a similar connotation—that FAIR is something to be afraid of, that heteronormative families are under attack, and that parents and families must protect their children. This narrative propagates several false strands, the last of which deserves

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attention. The idea that parents' rights are being trampled, or that parents should be able to "protect" their children from the dangers of learning about LGBTQ people and history ignores the disheartening reality that many LGBTQ youth are raised by non-LGBTQ parents who are not always supportive, to say the very least. A recent report put out by the Center for American Progress indicates that

LGBTQ youth continue to be disproportionately represented among homeless youth in our country and their experiences of homelessness continue to be characterized by violence, discrimination, poor health, and unmet needs. Family rejection, harassment in schools, and the shortcomings of juvenile justice and child welfare continue to drive these elevated rates of homelessness. (Cray, Miller & Durso, 2013)

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force supports these claims. In a recent report (November, 2013), they estimated that "20- 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBT or believe that they might be LGBT." Focusing specifically on the intersections of race and gender and sexuality, this report further reveals that LGBT youth of color, particularly African American and Native American youth, continue to be overrepresented among LGBT youth who are homeless. Attributing the struggle of LGBT youth of color partly to educational barriers and the U.S. educational system, this report suggests these students are at the highest risk for "dropping through the cracks"—and names causes such as "unsafe and under-resourced schools, a lack of support for LGBT students, [and the] 'school-to-prison' pipeline that results in significant numbers of LGBT students of color entering the juvenile justice and correctional systems."

Howe (1997) asserts that in order to foster equal and meaningful opportunities "worth wanting" for all students, it is education's responsibility to intervene and level those "group

differences in educational attainment that are systematically linked to goods such as employment, income, health” (p. 67) and, I argue, safety, support—and self-respect. As a public institution, schools are obligated to support all of their students, to acknowledge their existence, to affirm who they are. Yet, given the resounding silence in schools around GSD, the systemic exclusion that has been noted continuously in decades of education research (e.g., Dalley & Campbell, 2003; Friend, 1993) and the data on teachers’ attitudes and beliefs around these issues (e.g., Bower & Klecka, 2009; Dessel, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Petrovic & Rosiek, 2010), this fear framing has seemingly affected the ways in which teachers take on this responsibility. A climate of “sanctioned exclusion” (Hermann-Wilmarth, 2007), similar to what Iris Marion Young (1990) calls “cultural imperialism,” has left both pre- and in-service teachers uncertain about their obligations to include LGBTQ topics and people in curriculum and “uncertain about their responsibilities or their capacity to be advocates for gay- and lesbian-headed families and their children” (Hermann-Wilmarth 2007, p. 348). This dominant, fear discourse is reflected throughout my data.

### **Methods**

The arguments I make herein are based in a year-long case study of one school’s response to PD programming focused on implementation of the FAIR Education Act. In this study, I was a key actor with several roles: I developed and facilitated PD for teachers and staff; I developed and facilitated programming for the parents and school community members to introduce and explain FAIR and to support them in understanding LGBTQ issues in schools; I developed programming for the students, which was facilitated by the principal, teachers, and invited speakers. This programming included learning about and discussing LGBTQ terminology and GSD more broadly, engaging in classroom discussions, and attending all-school meetings

focused on scenarios related to LGBTQ people and topics; I was also the researcher in this case study.

### **Research context and participants: Hope Academy**

Opening its doors in the fall of 2012, Hope Academy is a new charter school for 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade students. Hope is committed to socioeconomic diversity, educational excellence, parent involvement, and to building community. The founding principal, Laurie, is my friend-- and former boss. She accepted the position around the same time that FAIR was passed and around the same time that I was developing my research plan for my dissertation.

Laurie is a committed leader. Her love and respect for kids, her teachers, parents and caregivers in the community, is tremendous. She listens to them, supports them to listen to one another, and to share their feelings. Her focus on the whole child, the minds and hearts of her students, their relationships with one another and the community—both in school and beyond, are some of many reasons why I chose to do my research at Hope.

FAIR is a progressive policy; requiring that teachers include the lives and history of the LGBT community; from my point of view, this was not going to be easy. I wondered how much support teachers would have in its implementation, if they even knew that this new law existed. I wondered what background knowledge they had, how comfortable they were with the topic, what their personal connections, or struggles, were. As a teacher and teacher educator, I care about teachers. I'm not in the business of blaming them, nor am I interested in making their lives more difficult, in telling them how to do their jobs or in pretending, even based on my 16 years of teaching high school and middle school, that I know the nuances of their days. I'm interested

in supporting them to do transformative work and wondered what this might look like in the context of FAIR. And I believed that if this policy had a chance to be taken up in any school, it would be one like this.

Hope is located in an urban metropolis in southern California. At the start of the 2012-13 school year, the student population included 37% white, 29% African American, 20% Latino, 14% students of Asian descent, American Indian descent, and students who declined to state. Thirty-four percent of Hope's students received free or reduced-priced lunch. Consistent with the goal a diverse student community was the mission to reflect this diversity in the staff. As displayed in Table 1, staff participants in my study represented a range of racial/ ethnic, sex, religious affiliations, and sexual orientations. Within the staff, ten teachers identified as heterosexual or straight, one as gay, and two as bisexual.<sup>33</sup>

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**Table 1. *Teacher Demographics (Self-Identified)***

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Race/ ethnicity</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Religious Affiliation</b>
Laurie (Principal)	White	F	Christian
Lucia	East Indian	F	Hindu/agnostic
Erika	African American	F	Christian
Nina	Persian	F	Jewish
Alicia	Black	F	Baptist christian
Emily	White	F	Agnostic
Samuel	Mexican-American	M	None
Chad	White/ Western European	M	I like them all
Billy	White	M	Catholic
James	Asian (Chinese)	M	None
Scott	White	M	Agnostic—athiest
Joni	White	F	
Terry	White/ Slavic	F	Unitarian Universalist

## **The professional development**

The interventions that I implemented were rooted in critical and transformative pedagogies (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2004; hooks, 1994; Sleeter and Delgado Bernal, 2004;) were research-based, and were derived from a review of the literature on professional development related to GSD, my experience as an educator, as well as insights from Queer and Democratic theories, which I describe in more detail elsewhere (Author, forthcoming). Previous studies indicated that in future programming that aims to address topics of GSD with teachers, more time, more conversations, and more sustained support are needed (e.g., Athanases & Larrabee, 2003; Dessel, 2010; Meyer, 2008; Payne & Smith, 2010; Riggs, et al, 2010; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2010). Throughout the 2012- 2013 school year, I visited Hope Academy six times, usually for the duration of a school week. In August, before school started, I provided nearly ten hours of directed PD for staff and in October, we spent six hours together, also in a PD setting. I also visited in December, January, March, and May. After the first two visits, I focused on supporting, observing, and interviewing teachers, both formally and informally. I also conducted interviews with parents and students and designed and facilitated an intervention for parents.

For the sake of this article, the focus of which is on discourse, I concentrate on the August and October visits, as these included the most engaged PD, meant to introduce teachers to FAIR and to engage them in critical dialogue and discussion of GSD. The directed PD that I delivered had three components, all of which were meant to trouble the discourse about LGBTQ topics and issues and their necessary place in schools, raise consciousness about teachers' own feelings and biases, engage teachers in classroom and school-wide scenarios related to GSD, and support them to take action, through both the social and academic curriculum. Throughout the PD, these three components: knowledge, critical self-reflection, and action were all grounded in

discussion and dialogue. Based on what the research says, what I know from my experiences in middle and high school classrooms, as well as in teaching pre-service teachers, I knew that I needed to include a “knowledge” component (Athanases and Larrabee 2003; Payne and Smith, 2010; Riggs, et al., 2010; Dessel, 2010). There were new laws<sup>34</sup> in place; the teachers needed to know what they were, what was required of them—as is a typical concern when it comes to the inclusion of GSD, what they could “get away with,” and what they were expected to do with respect to homophobic bullying as well as curricular inclusion. I also wanted to give them some insight about what the research says about the experiences of LGBTQ youth, as well as, and perhaps most importantly, what it says about teachers (Payne and Smith, 2010). Second, there was a focus on critical self-reflection. I asked teachers to interrogate their own ideas, beliefs, feelings, thoughts, and actions around issues of gender and sexuality, broadly, and in schools (Schniedewind and Cathers, 2003); we talked through our ideas in the staff community and we explored the role of systems (Schniedewind and Cathers, 2003) in providing—or not, safe and inclusive environments and opportunities that are “worth wanting” for students (Howe, 1997, p. 67). Lastly, the action component was meant to support teachers in their work both in the social and academic curriculum. Throughout my analyses, interventions are described more specifically, as these interventions were the catalyst for the conversations that followed.

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

Across the studies that I examined in my review of the literature, “time” was something that teachers wanted—*more time*-- to digest information, to collaborate with their peers, and to make sense of what they were being asked to do (Athanases and Larrabee 2003; Payne and

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Smith, 2010; Riggs, et al., 2010; Dessel, 2010). Within all strands of the PD were opportunities for participants to talk, to make sense of new concepts, expectations of the new laws, the school's mission as it relates to these issues and topics, and to explore their own feelings and questions about GSD. These conversations, among the staff and me, are a primary data source in my study, and focal in this article. In these conversations, I was interested in how teachers make sense together, that is, how teachers think about and communicate around issues of GSD in PD settings, and how they make sense of their professional responsibilities with respect to GSD. I triangulated these discussion data with participants' open ended, pre-PD survey responses to questions about their experiences with GSD in schools, thoughts and feelings about their role in providing students with equal educational opportunities, and supports they might need to create safe and inclusive spaces for students, especially with respect to GSD. I also kept a journal throughout the year to log my feelings, specific instances that stuck out to me, and to explain interactions that were meaningful to me; this journal, along with several email exchanges and phone conversations with the principal, were data sources as well.

To analyze these data, I first used an inductive approach. I coded all of the transcribed PD conversations from August and October, created a codebook, and looked for recurring themes and patterns. These themes and patterns were fine-tuned over several close readings (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Broad themes that emerged throughout the data were organized into narratives of fear and care. Within each of these themes, I identified additional codes. Within the broad theme of fear, for example, I coded fear of: parents, what's appropriate, perceptions that teaching about LGBTQ people and history is teaching about sex, what "this" is supposed to look like and how "this" is supposed to sound. Within care, codes revealed participants' desire to create safe and inclusive classrooms, protect their students from bullying, understand how to do this work, and

include GSD as part of doing their jobs. There was also a narrative of authority—attention to the mission and philosophy of the school, recent CA legislation, and what the research says; I take this theme up elsewhere, in a reflective piece about my role as a queer person providing this PD, and also studying the process (Author, forthcoming). Throughout these conversations, in which fear and care were the two main themes operating, there was only one instance that I coded “call to action.” In this code, one participant, James, names the struggle, between fear and care, and suggests a call to action, encouraging the staff to take responsibility for the many unknowns that exist in the implementation of FAIR.

As I examined the data more closely, I began to realize that the narratives of fear and care seemed to relate to normative discourses around GSD in schools and also of what it means to be a teacher. I also began to notice that these narratives were oftentimes in conflict or tension with one another, were competing, or were in reaction to one another, creating a larger discourse of struggle for teachers. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, I recognized that caring commitments were situated within narratives of fear. In other words, I found that discussions stalled out in places of fear—what I called “fear flares,” and in the context of these flares, participants expressed caring commitments. To understand more about the ways in which fear and care were functioning in the data, I turned to Foucault (1977, 1980, 1983, 1987, 1990) and Butler (1990, 1991, 1999, 2004a, 2004b) for concepts of discourse, power, and silence, added these to my inductive codes and applied them within and across data sources using constant comparison method (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999).

### **Findings: Fear flares and caring commitments**

In this section, I explore occasions throughout the initial stages of the year-long PD (August and October), in which fears flared in the conversations that we had. These occasions are defined as places where the staff took up an idea in depth, where they had a hard time letting it go, and/or where there was heated debate and dialogue. Fear flares all seemed to be related, in one way or another, to the appropriateness of including LGBTQ topics in school—how to “do” this work, what it looks like, when to bring it up, how to do so “naturally” (Laurie, October PD), and how to avoid parent misunderstandings that this is “not about sex” (Terry, October PD). Caring commitments emerged as participants referred to their roles as teachers—explaining that to do their jobs, to “just teach” (Samuel, October PD), they had to care about their students. Another level of these commitments was found as participants expressed a desire to understand what it might be like to include GSD in the curriculum and to make the school safe, not only with respect to bullying and physical harm, but also for students to be themselves.

Overall, in what I’m calling “fear flares” and “caring commitments,” the sticking points in our conversations, and the tensions that arose within them, seem to represent the *struggle* that the teachers felt throughout these initial conversations. They also seem to represent competing normative discourses related to whether or not it’s “appropriate” to include LGBTQ people and topics in schools and what it means to be a teacher – at least what it means to be a teacher at Hope Academy, a school that prides itself on community and diversity – while supporting students to grapple with complex societal issues through both the academic and social curriculum. What I present in the sections that follow are key examples of fear flares that occurred, one in August and one in October. I include a description of the intervention that preceded each flare, as these activities contextualize the conversations that follow. I organize the following analyses by first highlighting prominent themes that were salient through the dialogue

that occurred. I then turn to a presentation of data that is representative of participants' fears and that illuminates the caring commitments embedded within. Through these representations, I include short discussions-- analyses, commentary, connections to the literature, and to the ways in which these exchanges relate to normative discourse.

Throughout the year at Hope Academy, the teachers and the principal were engaged in dialogue that was meant to be transformative. As a staff, they shared their own experiences and feelings related to GSD, voiced curiosity and questions, and, for the most part, showed a genuine desire to understand how best to do this work. As part of the initial PD in August, I created scenarios meant to engage participants in possible situations that might arise throughout the year—with both parents and students. My decision to create these scenarios was mainly informed by participants' requests for “practice” in addressing issues of GSD, as well as from insight gained in my review of the literature. While theorizing, or simply talking about teachers' responsibilities related to GSD, seemed to be difficult at times, these scenarios provoked a more intense fear response.

### **August: Fear Flare 1—What's appropriate?**

The first and most prominent theme was grounded in participants' implicit grappling with what is deemed appropriate related to issues of GSD in schools. Within this theme were categories related to fear of “promoting” homosexuality, concern that Hope's students were too young for these conversations, and worry that if teachers talked about LGBTQ anything, then they would be perceived as talking about sex. All of these seemed connected to fear of what parents would say or think, a fear that was salient throughout the data. For instance, when asked in a pre-PD survey to share thoughts about the possible challenges educators might have in

confronting issues of sexuality and gender in schools, Lucia mentioned feeling “a little uncomfortable initiating a conversation that may go against what [students] are getting from home.” James also admitted that he would “find it challenging in regards to how to deal with parent concerns (parents who are not comfortable with it).” Chad shared a concern about keeping Hope, himself, and his colleagues “legally safe from parents that might be uncomfortable.” These kinds of responses were not uncommon and were no doubt, at least partly, a result of the dominant normative discourse related to the inclusion of LGBTQ people and topics in elementary, secondary and even college classrooms. According to Hermann-Wilmarth (2007), the national and political framing of LGBTQ issues in the United States has impacted the ways in which pre-service teachers view homosexuality and same sex relationships as “inappropriate to discuss with children in the classroom” (Schieble, 2012, p. 208; García & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010).

**“We're not promoting anything...”**

This idea of whether or not the staff was “promoting...homosexuality as a valid ‘alternative’ lifestyle” first emerged in a fishbowl that I set up for them in August, before the students arrived. I used a fishbowl format to get staff to talk with one another, but also because it was part of the school’s Advisory curriculum. To begin, I first explained the FAIR Education Act, legislation that they would be responsible for implementing. I then shared with them this hypothetical situation:

*Yesterday, in Ms. X’s social studies class she talked about social revolutions. Her focus was on “what’s worth fighting for” and she related it to issues of identity: race, ethnicity, religion, biological sex, gender, sexuality, ability and others that she and the students brought to the discussion. As a result of the FAIR Education Act, LGBT history and people will be part of the*

*social studies curriculum. She expects this conversation to extend outside of the academic realm so she wanted to talk to the students about this in a way that had more to do with identity than with “curriculum.” Today, all of the parents received this email—from another parent:*

*Dear Parents,*

*As some of you might know, there is a new “law” called the “Fair Education Act.” It says instruction and textbooks in social sciences must include a study of the contributions of minorities, people with disabilities, and those in the LGBT community. They say that they are really just talking about learning “factual history” and “making sure that all students are prepared to understand who we are as a country, and that includes the diversity in our country.” As opponents of this bill, we (several of the Hope School parents) want it repealed. Members of the LGBT community should not appear in textbooks based on their sexual orientation. Right now, they should be talked about based on their contributions to history, not about what they may or may not have done in the bedroom. This is new indoctrination and **THERE IS NO PARENTAL CONSENT**. We fear the sexualization of education and also the fiscal burden it could impose on the state. In addition to its corrupting consequences for children about love, human sexuality, marriage, and family, it will cost California taxpayers millions to implement and have a disrupting effect on local school districts struggling with reduced budgets and burdened by state mandates that undermine their critical mission of educating our children. As parents of innocent children, we are concerned. Please support us at an all school meeting on Thursday evening. Thank you—*

*Concerned Parents*<sup>35</sup>

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*Along with this email, several teachers were confronted today, by parents, about Ms. X's discussion, and kids are starting to talk about this in your classrooms. There are kids in your school who have same-sex parents. There are, noticeably, kids who identify outside of gender "norms."*

After reading the letter to them aloud, I asked participants to reflect, in writing, on the following questions: *What is your response to this letter: emotionally, intellectually, viscerally? What is informing this response?* I also presented them with questions to consider for this discussion, as follows: *A parent finds you in your classroom and says: So, we are worried about the fact that this school promotes homosexuality as a valid "alternative" lifestyle and we think that kids are too young to talk about these issues. Does a letter like this—along with what you overhear kids saying—influence your lesson plans? If so, how? What do you say in your classroom? Are you proactive? Do you wait for students to bring it up?* After some time to reflect individually, our conversation began.

**Terry** started off by saying:

The first thing that stands out to me is the word "promote"—like the idea that, that, that, if kids are talking about something it means you're promoting it. So I think it would be worth opening the conversation with the parent, asking them what was it about the lesson that your child was involved with that made you *feel* or that sounded to you like it meant that something was being promoted rather than explored in the same way that they explore everything else.

Alicia followed: Just a question related to this, I guess—also in response to the parent, in the same way that we're talking about African American history month, oh, this is

Langston Hughes, an African American writer, if we're supporting black history month, which is another whole other conversation, if we're talking about people and their contributions... ok, this is blank, he was a gay man and this is what he did and we're going to learn about this right now. I mean, if that's the way we're coming at it, then I don't think we're promoting it, we're identifying it just like anything else, whether it's a woman that made a contribution, a black person, there's just going to be, like, differentiation, they might -- just information.

Terry: Yeah, the difference between promote and informing them—we're just giving them information.

Samuel: That would be my response, I'm not promoting anything, I'm just teaching about respect for that person and he's gay—(jumbled words)....

This exchange highlighted some key themes in teachers' sense-making about their roles in taking up GSD in their classrooms. The initial need, by Terry-- to explain herself to parents, seemed to represent her desire to make sure that parents knew that what she was doing was appropriate and that what students were doing was just “exploring,” receiving “information” like “everything else.” This is consistent with research about teachers' fears about parents in general. In Dessel's (2010) study, teachers expressed fear and reluctance to be affirming and welcoming to LGB students out of fear that there would be repercussions from parents and administration. These repercussions, in some cases, may include teachers losing their jobs, but may also include more subtle forms of loss—of support from the school community, or sadly, of respect or trust from parents and/ or students. But what does it really mean to “promote” something? Terry's distinction between “promoting” and “exploring” seemed significant, though I'm not certain Terry would say that she disagrees with the idea of *promoting* that kids be themselves, which

includes “promoting homosexuality as a valid alternative lifestyle” for some students. Terry shared several times that these issues were really close to her heart and that this was “personally important” to her, that regardless of the law, “it’s also a personal mandate... to be as inclusive as possible” (August PD). This exchange also highlighted participants’ focus on mere inclusion, on “giving [students] information” only-- what many scholars (Kumashiro, 2001; Britzman, 1995; Blackburn, 2010) believe to be problematic if we are to shift heteronormative school cultures.

Later in the conversation, Alicia again focused on how “important” was to “let the parents know that we're not promoting anything” but just “educating the kids” about the fact that a number of different people, with various identities, make contributions. She went on to say,

“[i]t's like just a part of the culture now; it's a way of life-- and legally we have to teach it anyway. But I have to be prepared to tell parents that I wasn't telling Shaun to be gay, we were learning about this author today-- and it happened to be a gay woman who made great strides in this section that we're teaching.

This passage seemed to reveal the complexity of this topic and why it is not “just teaching.” While Alicia nodded to the normalization of GSD--being “part of the culture now,” she also mentioned the legal responsibility; mandated by authority, they “have to teach it now.” What seemed to come with this responsibility, however, was a need to justify, or to explain to parents that the inclusion of LGBTQ people and history was not “recruiting” students to be gay, nor was it “teaching about sex” another major theme that surfaces, both in explicit and subtle ways, throughout this discussion. Terry continued,

I also think, and this has been brought up earlier, I also think that, that, that, or, or, or, ... a lot of parents who are uncomfortable with this kind of curriculum- it's

important to find an opportunity to reassure them that we are not number 1.

advocating anything, and number 2. talking about the nuts and bolts of sex.

Alicia's fear that teaching students about the accomplishments of LGBTQ people in some way would be construed as her "telling Shaun to be gay" and Terry's need to "reassure the parents" that they were not "talking about the nuts and bolts of sex" highlighted the effects of the dominant discourse, or the fear, that the FAIR Education Act, or indeed, anything related to homosexuality, is about sex, is about indoctrinating students to be/ become homosexual. These are caring people, committed teachers who, I believe, had a genuine interest in supporting all students to be themselves and who wanted to be more inclusive. There was, however, an obvious struggle here that seemed to be informed by competing discourses. Dominant discourses that suggested that teaching about LGBTQ people and history was "inappropriate" seemed to be in tension with a big part of what it meant to be a teacher—to care for and to support all students. This tension was pervasive throughout this exchange, and throughout our discussions. Even though FAIR provides teachers and schools with a clear mandate to include LGBTQ people and history in the curriculum, participants still seemed heavily influenced by a narrative of fear—one that not only, perhaps, causes this struggle, but also prevents teachers from moving beyond mere inclusion of LGBTQ issues within the curriculum to disrupting heteronormativity in schools.

### **Caring Commitments: This is what it means to be a teacher OR I'm just doing my job**

Embedded in the *fear flare* above, and others throughout the data, participants simultaneously demonstrated a desire to care for and support all of their students, as well as create an environment where students were safe to be themselves. In the form of what I'm calling "caring commitments," teachers expressed the desire to "do this work," i.e., to take concrete steps to include LGBTQ issues and people in the normative discourse of the school and

in their curriculum. Within these commitments, there was a subtheme, very practical explanations that doing this work was just part of the job, maybe even inherently what it meant to be a teacher, at least what it meant to be a teacher at Hope. Caring commitments, evident throughout the year, continued to compete with a fear that including these topics might not be the right thing to do, or might be inappropriate.

The initial denial of “promoting” anything was quickly taken up by Alicia and Samuel, both of whom explained that this was just part of teaching—“like anything else,” though this is clearly not the case, given the controversy that it has continued to garner. There are not, for example, countless and continued conversations about how to include the Pythagorean theorem, when it might be appropriate, and how to respond to concerned parents. The struggle to make sense of their responsibilities, to include and normalize GSD, continued as Alicia offered insight into ways that “that community” could be integrated into lesson plans:

And an easy way you could do it in lesson plans would be to maybe think of people who are in that community when we're introducing lessons and topics so that we're making the distinction that everyone is not a straight person, so that we're showing difference and that people in the community do make contributions that are just as important as heterosexual people who are making contributions... eventually kids are going to be like, Ms. X, why are you always pointing out that this person is gay... and that would just be able to open it up with students or let them know that it's clear or that we're comfortable discussing that with them. Right? (August PD).

Alicia's caring commitment to be sure that her students knew that “everyone is not a straight person” and that people “in the community do make contributions that are just as important as heterosexual people” showed that she was willing, as she says, to let students know that she is

comfortable having these discussions. Research shows that when teachers implement LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum, students report feeling safer at school (Burdge, Sinclair, Laub, & Russell, 2012; GLSEN, 2011; Russell, McGuire, Toomey, & Anderson, 2010; Russell, Kosciw, Horn, Saewyc, 2010; Burdge, Snapp, Lub, Russel, & Moody, 2013). She ended, however, curious to know if this was “right,” which signified that there was uncertainty in what this should all look like. Samuel’s response was affirming, “[r]ight”—but he quickly added “but you’re teaching, not promoting.” Again, there was a turn here to the idea that this was a practical matter, just part of the job that teachers have, *to teach*; yet the need to distinguish “teaching” from “promoting” made this seem like it was not, in fact, very typical, for reasons that seemed to be revealed throughout the conversation.

Throughout this discussion, teachers also shared caring commitments to embed GSD naturally in their curriculum, though the same narratives seemed to be at play and in tension. Nina’s comments below exemplified this tension.

I also like that earlier you were saying that if you naturally embed it in your curriculum, then you’re not talking about like... you’re just saying, it’s a gay man or whatever-- you’re not talking about...; your changing perceptions of teaching anything that has to do with homosexuality, because you’re not talking about the sexual aspects of it or anything like that. You’re talking about contributions to the lesson and the kids are less likely to walk away from that and go home and say "Mom, I learned about a gay person blah blah blah." They focus on the lesson and it changes their association of what those things mean because it’s curriculum-- instead of them thinking... because homosexuality is already... has a bad rap, has a rap of being looked at as what you do in the bedroom and

that's what the person becomes-- and this would completely change that if we embed it into the curriculum. (October PD)

Nina stopped twice as she explained what teachers would “not” be talking about; this hesitation potentially indicates that she is trying to make sense of embedding GSD into the curriculum without talking about... sex. She went on to make the case that “naturally embedding it” would serve as a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse, and the “bad rap” that homosexuality already has. This caring commitment, not only to include “it” in the curriculum, but also to deliberately “change perceptions” highlighted Nina’s desire to move beyond mere inclusion and to change the normative discourse around what is “appropriate” in schools.

At one point in this conversation, there was a shift, beginning with Terry, from more fear-focused to an explicit personal, caring commitment to be “as inclusive as possible.” This shift, to a more social-justice centered focus, seemed driven by ideas of what it meant to be a teacher. Terry explicitly stated that while this was a law, she did not want to give parents the idea that the reason why she’d be teaching it was *because* of the law, but rather, that this was “personally important.” Billy agreed, saying “that’s just not a question.” Laurie, the principal, then entered the conversation, with an attempt, it seemed, to negotiate between the fear and the care that these teachers expressed.

I want to say something that's really important... it's really not about how I have a conviction to teach this because of who I am,...I'm not teaching this because of who I am; I'm teaching this because it's part of the curriculum and it's part of the philosophy and the mission of the school....We have a school; we have a mission; we have a philosophy, so whenever we talk to parents we can say—‘as you know, the mission of this school is to really build and create a diverse community’....and this is true- every meeting that I

have given, every open house, I have talked about how one of our goals is to create an environment where kids don't just accept differences but they embrace them and I've mentioned gay, lesbian, different families, races, religions, socioeconomic status—I've mentioned it all-- and I've said that we are going to go there; we're going to talk about all of those things at our school, so we can always fall back on-- this is part of the school's mission,... and I think it's important that we're all on the same page... and that we depersonalize it and say, as you know, it's just really part of our school mission.

In her message, Laurie seemed to be, in some way, trying to quell teachers' fears by focusing on the mission of the school. At the same time, however, rather than speaking to or acknowledging the fact that they actually personally cared about implementing FAIR, she requested teachers “depersonalize it.” While I understand that in certain contexts, holding communities accountable through laws and policies is critical, I question the strength of this stance—and yet, I exercised the same strategy with the teachers (Author, forthcoming). Why was this about the mission and not about the kids? Or about the rights of students to equal educational opportunities that are “worth wanting” (Howe, 1997), or about what the staff believed was critical to seeing the mission through—and not just because they had to, but because they wanted to? How was this move to “depersonalize” these issues in conflict with what it meant to be a teacher, especially a teacher whose job it was to “instill in [their] students civil responsibility,” to engage them in “a democratic school environment,” and to challenge them to “grapple with complex societal issues,” and to encourage them to “have a voice” (Message from Laurie, school website, 2012)? I ask these questions in part as an extension of what began this project. FAIR passed, yet how would FAIR be taken up? Was the law going to be enough? Were teachers knowledgeable about the topic? Were they comfortable exploring the topic in classes? And mostly, what would it take

for teachers to be committed to doing this work—with the understanding that they may not be held accountable for doing so? I struggle with the fear inherent in Laurie’s message.

### **October- Fear Flare 2: What is this supposed to look like and how does it sound?**

Within this fear flare were several key themes. First, participants grappled with the invisibility of sexuality, maintaining that other forms of diversity (e.g. race) were easier to bring up with students because they were recognizable. This theme was reignited later in the conversation as participants struggled to understand how to bring up topics of GSD “naturally” and “in what context.” They were cautious about exactly what language to use when trying to support students to develop an understanding of GSD, and LGBTQ people and history. In this discussion, participants’ concern about what’s appropriate is again revealed, and even throughout their care to attend to their students and to create safe and inclusive environments, the fear was never relinquished.

#### **The invisibility of sexuality: If you can’t see it, is it really there?**

In October, I went back out to Hope Academy with data in hand. Using the open-ended responses from the student surveys that were administered in the beginning of the year, I created short vignettes.<sup>36</sup> These vignettes were meant to be case study students for teachers to consider as they planned lessons and talked through ways of creating an overall environment of safety and inclusivity.<sup>37</sup>

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In groups, teachers worked with one case study student. Their first assignment was to write a reflection about the student who they received: *What are your overall thoughts, feelings, fears, hopes about how to support this student? Which characteristics are drawing your attention? Why?* Given the following prompt, the goal in their small groups was to first create an individual action plan, and then a classroom action plan: *How would you respond, rather than react? Through the academic curriculum? Social curriculum? What would be your goals? How does your plan serve to meet these goals?*

One of the groups had a student named “Madeline”—a 7<sup>th</sup> grade girl who identified as white. In her vignette, she explicitly stated the following:

*On Monday, we were in homeroom (we're all in the same one—my mom called the school and got me switched into the same homeroom as my friends! Isn't that cool?! ) and Ms. J was making us do some 'get to know you' activity. She asked ...one question about gay people and my friends and I thought that was soooooo funny! I said how I know that God thinks being gay is wrong, and gay people are all going to hell. My friends all agreed with me. Our school would be way better if everyone agreed more, don't you think?*

In their action plan, the group that had Madeline didn't mention her homophobia at all; in fact, no one mentioned gender or sexuality. Given the focus of the PD and the main reason I was out there at all, I said, “Did anyone take up the issue of sexuality? Related to Madeline's vignette?”

Alicia responded to my question, explaining that they started to talk about it,

but then it came back to the whole thing we had just started talking about which was that were not trying to change the students religious beliefs, we're just trying to get them to accept that people are different and that we want to accept that especially in

this environment because we're accepting of everybody and then we didn't get beyond that statement..." (October, PD).

I jokingly lamented, "poor little sexuality... always gets kicked to the curb...." and went on to say that I heard talk about racial differences and how to support students in ways that relate to racial diversity, which is so important and necessary. But then I asked them—"you have a student in this group that was like gay people are bad and going to hell, so what do you do with that? In your curriculum, what do you do?" The conversation here moved to the invisibility of sexuality, to the idea that "race is an easier discussion for kids to have, than sexuality" (Nina, October PD) that it was more "concrete" (Lucia, October PD).

While this was not a salient theme throughout my data, I do believe that this is very important to note. Many times, teachers said that if the students brought it up, then they had no problem talking about it—"it" being LGBTQ topics. The fact that sexuality is not typically something that one can "see" makes it easy for teachers to assume that none of their students are LGBTQ; this also makes it critical for them to name LGBTQ people in history, to recognize same-sex couples, and to normalize GSD in their classrooms through discourse. How students are able to define themselves and how they are defined by others "can only be expressed and understood through categories and concepts available to them through language or discourse" (Dutro, et al, 2012,p. 276). Language, then,

constitutes a prism through which human knowers organize, interpret, and give meaning to their experiences. Language marks out the limits of the possible. It tells us what to think because it is impossible to think outside language. (Pellegrini, 1992, p. 43)

Given that discourse sets the boundaries for what is considered fully human, the consequences of heteronormative discourses that are pervasive in schools is not only problematic, but dangerous

(Butler, 1999). Often reinforcing the marginalization of students who present outside of the gender binary, and/ or who identify as LGBTQ, these discourses call into question “[w]ho counts as human?” (Butler, 2004, p. 20), a question with which many students have had to sit alone. In trying to support teachers to include LGBTQ themes and topics, language itself quickly became a focus, and the subject of another fear flare.

### **Language: What do we call this? How do we bring this up ‘naturally’?**

Our discussion of the case studies, steered queer by me, moved quickly to a question of how this should all sound. Joni initiated this conversation: “I have a question. We keep saying ‘gay’ but do we have a language that we're going to use in the classroom and what is it? Several teachers chime—“great question” (James, Chad, Laurie, October PD). In my response, I explained that “my personal request was to say LGBTQ, to say Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Questioning” (October PD), when referring to the community-at-large. Laurie jumped in,

Right, I don't think so. We're not there yet. (ME: Hmm.) First of all, that's going to take a whole lot of energy-- I mean, they're barely into... I mean we have to think of something but I think like the whole explanation of all of those words is a lot for this age.

ME: I don't. And I'm pretty up on the research. That's how it's going to be in the curriculum in the social sciences. It's going to be LGBT in the social sciences curriculum for California. That's written in the law. I don't think it's too much for these kids....

Lucia: I think grade six is hard—

Erika: But I don't think there's harm in teaching them the terms, like all we're doing is teaching them the words. I don't think there's harm in that...they've probably never heard

LGBTQ, but they know the terms-- they know what a lesbian is, what gay is, maybe bisexual-- so I don't think it's too overwhelming.

Laurie: Well, I guess I mean... it's true. If we're going to be teaching this, then we're going to be teaching the terms, I guess-- Yes, we are....

Teachers' concerns about what this should sound like seemed to be influenced, again, by the normative discourse around what is appropriate, particularly in middle schools. Laurie's fear that these words were "a lot" for this age were supported by Lucia's concern about 6<sup>th</sup> graders. Erika's comment, while seemingly aiming to resist heteronormative discourse, was embedded in it; the idea that "teaching them the words" would not do "harm" to them, seemed to justify the position that teaching students about LGBTQ people and history could actually damage them or cause harm. Given the stories of students who have been bullied in both middle and high schools for their perceived or actual sexual identities, as well as the reality of students who have taken their young lives as a result, this fear seems misguided (GLSEN, 2011). Laurie "fell back" on the fact that if they were going to be teaching "this," then they would have to use language to signify the subjects to whom they refer (Butler, 2004). This idea of naming, of making LGBTQ people recognizable and intelligible (Butler, 2004), while not in and of itself enough, is critical to disrupting heteronormativity, though how to go about this, exactly, seemed to preoccupy participants.

Our conversation about what including LGBTQ topics should sound like was followed by how this inclusion should look-- "in what context" it should be brought up "naturally" (Laurie, October PD). While this conversation was clearly rooted in care, it quickly turned to a question of whether or not this was about sex. James asked,

I feel like the "in what context" thing is the question and like Laurie mentioned, there's

talk of Sex Ed and I'm just confused as to how this is not like... that's what it's about--- sex education, it's about sex, right? So...

Laurie and I both quickly corrected this assumption, maintaining that this is about “relationships and families.” James continued,

I know. I'm just saying that the terms are ones that relate to that and if they don't have that, if they don't have any education on sex and sexuality then isn't it-- I feel like it's just one place where...

Laurie interrupted, “[t]hen it's saying that gay is all about sex” and Samuel agreed, “Yeah, exactly.” Laurie was concerned that talking about LGBTQ people and topics alongside of talking about sex would send the wrong signal, but went on to admit,

What I'm having trouble with is that I think it comes up naturally and that we need to start talking more about this, but it doesn't feel natural that we just come in and say *(sarcastic tone)* ‘Guys, today we're going to talk about these terms,’ you know? But at the same time, I hear what you're (ME) saying, so I'm just not sure- if we're having conversations about the N word,<sup>38</sup> that's just very natural... like doesn't feel natural to just introduce these terms.

Implicit in Laurie's response was the question of what is natural and what is unnatural.

Influenced by the smog of heteronormativity, her concern seemed to suggest that teaching students what the acronym, LGBTQ, meant was out of place or unusual. Recall that this segment of the PD was focused on case studies that were created based on actual student data; Madeline's vignette was created in part from the students' open-ended survey responses, as well as from stories that Laurie shared with me over email and in phone conversations about students' initial

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responses to the mere mention of the word “gay.” In a conversation just before I arrived, she said “the kids can’t go a minute without saying something is ‘gay’ and that they laugh any time they hear the word. They say that they think that it’s wrong—“ (Journal, October 12, 2013). I began by asking questions geared toward taking action to shift the school culture: *How would you respond, rather than react? Through the academic curriculum? Social curriculum? What would be your goals? How does your plan serve to meet these goals?* Still though, aside from homophobic slurs, or in sex education, there was confusion about when it could possibly come up. Laurie mentioned that talking about “the N word” was “very natural”-- in the context of addressing racial slurs with students. This follows the literature in the sense that teachers often report being comfortable with stopping bullying—general or identity-related (i.e. race, sexuality); not as many are comfortable or feel that it is their responsibility to introduce students to topics of GSD (Petrovic and Rosiek, 2010). This seemed validated in Laurie’s response, which suggested that her comfort, that is, what was “natural” to her was to “bring it up before it becomes a problem” or to bring it up “in a particular context” (Laurie, October PD), the context being one in which a problem needed to be addressed. The silence around LGBTQ people and topics in schools, the absence, is part of the discourse, part of what makes the normalization of inclusion unthinkable, or unknowable.

### **Caring Commitments: Getting past ‘the terms’ and ‘bringing ‘it’ up’**

The October PD that I planned was developed not only with data from the students, but also in response to staff feedback after my August visit, as well as feedback on their pre-PD surveys. To feel confident in providing these opportunities, especially with respect to GSD, teachers said that they needed practice with scenarios, support in creating lesson plans, readings, and overall support in including these topics into the academic curriculum. The October PD

included several scenarios for them to talk through, the aforementioned vignettes, as well as resources<sup>39</sup> for them to use as they developed plans for curriculum inclusion. As the conversation moved to how to bring this up “naturally,” the staff expressed a real desire to figure this out, though even through their care, the fear was never abandoned. Nina responded to Laurie’s query about how to bring it up naturally, by asking “we bring it up randomly because we want that, right?” Chad continued,

I was going to say that the same way you mention the math problem and the two dads, something like that. I think a lot of stuff-- not that you set aside a lesson to bring this up, but I think each term and each concept can be brought up in its own way-- bite size but not a whole study on this... but even things like them saying a man dressed as a woman is gay--- saying-- well, hold on, that person might not actually be gay, but... whatever. So these moments come up... and we can talk about terms as they come up—.

After some brief banter, Joni shared

So, I think the place that it comes up naturally is in family and partnerships-- every child is going to have a family, some will have gay members, so if we are focusing on family and community, then were going to have to include and acknowledge that there are same sex, and I don’t know how to put this, but same sex partners... I don’t like the word sex in it, but partners that are both men or both women. And that doesn't focus on sexuality or any terms that are not understandable and that have to be unpacked—so maybe that’s our in, maybe partnerships, family, and community is our in.

It is at this point that James moved beyond the caring commitments and suggested that the staff take action to create a plan, as he tried to unpack what their goals might be in creating space for

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FAIR and its successful implementation. This was the only time that a member of the staff requested a call to action. He named their struggle, and then suggested that it was their responsibility to figure out how this should all look.

Okay so, if this is something that we want to include in teaching and curriculum and we feel confused about it and I'm just throwing it out there... I feel like there's not clear objectives here and I feel like that's something that needs to be talked about on a more specific level. I mean, maybe we have larger objectives but breaking it down, I mean, isn't that how we plan, how we teach, backward design and instruction? I mean, lesson planning? That's just a simple way to be methodical about this-- at least try it that way, um, you know? There haven't been standards; that's the thing: there are these laws, but there haven't been standards written yet and that's the real dilemma and that's well, maybe during this interim period before that happens, maybe that's something that's on us— to do, to author-- before just jumping in and not just trying this and that, but seeing what works, and just figuring out-- what is it, actually, that we want to do? I mean. It's like are we just building this dream up? I mean, do we want them to just hear the words or like comprehend the words? On what level do we want them to comprehend the words? Do we want them to use them, apply them? Do we want them to, you know, whatever-- what do you guys think about that?

James' call to action suggested that having a new law was not enough. He recognized that there were some missing pieces, that there were no “standards” for implementation and made the case for teachers at Hope to be frontrunners in this effort. He also questioned the degree to which they were going with “the terms,” the depth that they were committed to exploring. Chad agreed: “it's great to step back and look at things in that way” and to “decide what the actual plan is.” This

was a missed opportunity. James moved beyond a mere commitment to care and took a step toward action and instead of being responsive to this move and shifting the focus back to the original intent of this PD, which was to support them in creating a plan, neither I, nor the staff, really took this up.

The conversation continued with Nina, a math teacher, saying that

It's my concern also- if I say to my kids, John and Jim took their kids to the theme park, or wherever... where am I going with that? Am I waiting to see a reaction? Do I want to have a discussion with them? Am I saying, if I hear a reaction—"okay guys- LGBTQ here's the vocab..."

ME: Well... you want to normalize it as much as possible and then take the conversation where it will go. I can see this as an all school thing, I mean, if you start to hear gay this and that-- *and even a few times*.... By the time you hear it 3 times, maybe it happens 6 times in a day, so you assume you're not hearing it every time it happens so you bring it to an all school meeting and you say, "So, here's the deal, when you say this, we're talking about..."

Laurie: See, right, like I can see that, like, ...if you're doing your math lesson and you say John and Jim take their kids to the park and they bought them ice cream ... and then kids say, why did you say Jim and John and you say because they're a couple and they have 2 kids - 'but they're men' and 'yeah... they're two men and they're married' and then that starts the conversation and then from that, they say 'oh they're fags' and you can say, 'well, that's a derogatory term'-- and then it comes up that you introduce those terms—to me, that's perfect. But walking into a class and saying *guys, these are the terms we're using to describe*... to me that feels like whoa.... I just feel like that's an unnaturalized

way— and so I think any naturalized way-- I mean, if kids start talking about it and then a teacher says well, the correct way of describing those terms are... and then it comes up. I would say, any discussion that happens in class, that would be an opportunity,... but I don't think we have to wait until kids start using those words to address the issue of, you know, using it in our curriculum. I feel like we should be doing that and hopefully that will bring up those discussions so that we can start dealing with those issues and introducing those terms.... And also, as that comes up, I would address that in all-school meeting.

Laurie's initial example included using same-sex couples in a math lesson, a "naturalized" way bring it up—though, the expectation was that students would react with homophobic responses, responses that would have to be "corrected;" this was to be expected, especially given initial reactions from some students-- and further reflects the need to normalize GSD throughout the school culture. She also reminded teachers, however, that they shouldn't wait for students to "start using these words" (seemingly in negative ways) to begin introducing LGBTQ people and topics into the curriculum, and ended with the idea that doing so would allow them to "deal with those issues" and even to start this discussion at an all-school meeting. Several teachers reacted to this idea, saying that this would be "the wrong environment" (Scott), that "students would laugh; you'd have people making fun" (Emily).

I again entered the conversation, this time reacting with a hint of frustration,

I am having a really hard time understanding why it would be such a big deal to say, 'hey this is something that's happening in our school and it's being used in a derogatory way and we want to talk about what these words mean....'

Laurie: I wouldn't have a problem with it. I, I, I.—wouldn't have problem with it.

Throughout this PD, Scott called for the need to educate parents.<sup>40</sup> This need was seemingly driven by fear-- that parents would react to what they perceived to be inappropriate curriculum, or that the passage of FAIR meant that students would now be talking about sex in school.

Scott: But the problem is that, what I was saying, I think part of us-- this needs to be a parent education piece too... otherwise it's not- if it's not being backed by... and the parents aren't aware of it and the kids just come home with these 'well guess what they talked about in class today,' and this is everything and I think it's not really a matter of our school culture or our students per say, it's the bigger thing and I worry about just the idea of-- and this is the arguments that I've read about this new curriculum.... is that it is, like Laurie was talking about, there really is no way for ...

I can do this because I can separate those two things-- sex and sexuality-- those are two different things to me; they are not to 90% of these parents (Laurie: Right.). 'You're talking about sex in school? I don't want that at all.' (ME: Right, and then they come and you educate them, but the fact of the matter is...) ...That's going to be the thing that breaks your school down--. Then you'll have THAT be the thing that's out there and it will just be nonstop...

Scott's concern here was consistent with the concern that he shared in his pre-PD survey, in which he said that he could "see enrollment decreasing if we are too aggressive and assertive about sexuality and diversity beyond race and religious beliefs." Inherent in his concern was the perception that most parents were incapable of discerning between sex and sexuality, and that these parents would likely have issues with FAIR. Scott admitted that this is not really a matter

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of [Hope's] school culture or [their] students per say" but "the bigger thing"—the dominant narrative, or the "argument," that surrounds FAIR. His fear escalated to such a degree that he believed that this would be the "thing" that would "break your school down" and that parent push-back would be nonstop. (Throughout the year, there was only one vocal parent who was unhappy with the amount of conversations that were had related to gender and sexual diversity.) While I understand this fear and acknowledge that the threat of push-back is real, to me, we were headed into a black hole. It was as if Scott was bracing us all for parents to be outside with picket signs, ready to shut the school down.

ME: I feel like this is the kind of fear that has kept this out of the classroom for this long. (Laurie and Chad: right, right, hmm, hmm). It's like-- this is a law. It's a law!!! *That's it.* You know-- and I hate to rely on that, but the fact of the matter is that it is and, you know- you can point parents to that when they--- 'no, we're actually talking about this as part of the Civil Rights Movement, or we're talking about... groups in our country that have been oppressed or marginalized' or whatever, but I think we get into some dangerous thinking when we're reacting from a place of fear.

I ended this conversation by, again, reminding these teachers that this is "the law!! *That's it.*" I don't know if I could have been any more wrong about this. It is so very clearly not the law, alone, not the "mission" of the school, not "what the research says," that is going to disrupt heteronormative practices, change attitudes, or shift a political and social paradigm. The law, alone, will not make our students safe, affirmed, or proud to be whomever they are constantly becoming (Author, forthcoming).

Throughout this conversation, fear and care were intertwined to such a degree that it is difficult to ignore their relationship-- as two sides of the same coin. These teachers wanted to

create safe and inclusive environments for and with their students. Given, however, historical and current sociopolitical contexts of fear and of silence, as well as normative discourse that suggests that any disruption of heteronormative ideals, be these inclusion of LGBTQ history or talk of same sex couples, is inappropriate in schools, they were afraid of what would happen when they tried. While “time to talk” was a theme that I initially thought was important for the sake of supporting teachers to make sense of the new law, their role in moving forward, and for taking action, what is a critical take-away from teachers’ conversations was what actually happened when they did talk and what this can buy us as teacher educators of both pre- and in-service teachers.

### **Discussion/ Implications**

With changing political climates (i.e., gay marriage, the overturning of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and popular culture, i.e., “out” characters and same-sex relationships recognized in the media) and an interest in more “inclusion” from certain communities when it comes to LGBTQ people and history in school curricula (i.e., FAIR), it might seem that teachers would feel more confident and more supported in their attempts to create safe and inclusive classrooms for their students. Research indicates that curricular inclusion increases safety, creates healthier climates, and fosters in students a greater sense of connectedness when they see themselves in curriculum. The same research shows that administrator support and buy-in from the school community are critical to FAIR’s success (GSA Network, 2013). In my study, while the teachers and the school’s principal were “on board” (Laurie, phone conversation, summer 2012), pervasive narratives and dominant discourse related to LGBTQ people and schools seemed to leave participants, both teachers and administration, struggling-- navigating the tensions between fear

and care.

Dominant discourses about LGBTQ people and topics, perpetuated throughout the media, have major implications for the ways in which teachers make sense of their responsibilities to implement FAIR. Understanding the ways in which large-scale social discourses function at local levels, in ways that are consequential—politically, ideologically, and culturally, is critical to uncovering often invisible power relations and, in this case, disrupting heteronormativity (Luke, 1995-96). Throughout my study, participants’ commitments to care were situated in webs of fear. Normative discourses of what’s “appropriate,” what should be “promoted” and what is “normal” and caring discourses about how to acknowledge GSD throughout the curriculum and how to create a school in which all students felt safe to be themselves, remained in tension throughout our conversations. Scholars have indicated that teachers 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); yet, might these fears be more isolated than we think? Throughout the year, teachers at Hope did quite a bit to introduce, unpack, and normalize GSD (Author, forthcoming)—and only one parent spoke out against this effort, citing religious affiliation as her reason. The ways that teachers internalized the fear discourse, however, became projected as external concerns, whether they were real or not. Further, given this recent legislation, we might reconsider the power(lessness) of parent reactions; that is, we might use parental push-back as a leverage point for educating school communities, instead of remaining silent or recoiling from it.

To normalize GSD in schools, teachers need to have the support to learn about these topics, to also be able to grapple, that is, to feel what they feel, to engage with what they grew up “knowing,” and to hold each other accountable to give each student a chance to feel wanted,

seen, and to have opportunities in education that are “worth wanting” (Howe, 1997). I agree with Hermann-Wilmarth (2007) when she says: “[u]ntil there are more discussions... about how to include in our curricula the experiences of students who either live in households with same-gender parents or who are grappling with their own sexuality, teachers will continue to see these concerns as ‘sensitive issues’... that have no place in the public school classroom” (p. 349). But they need more than this. What we, as teacher educators, can learn from what happened when these teachers engaged in conversation, is that more needs to be done to prepare and support teachers to overcome the fear that comes along with their responsibility—and their desire-- to include topics of GSD. Policies like FAIR are necessary because they are part of what makes schools democratic, but such policies, which are meant to give “fair and accurate” pictures of historically marginalized groups, such as the LGBTQ community, are controversial, and their implementation cannot be left up to teachers alone.

Educating administrators and faculty and staff who are now in the field is critical to the success of FAIR and to disrupting heteronormativity. Right now, lessons required under FAIR “must be age-appropriate and will be developed at the local level, where school districts will decide what’s appropriate for each classroom based on parent and teacher input” (<http://www.gsanetwork.org/FAIR/facts>). Given this lack of guidance, I turn to James and his “call to action.” To support teachers on a school-level to implement FAIR, given “there is a law, but there haven't been standards written yet” and acknowledging that “that's the real dilemma” then “maybe during this interim period before that happens, maybe that’s something that’s on us— to do, to author—“ (James, October PD). On a school-level, there needs to be a plan, talk of how to do this, what to call it, how to support parents to understand this new law, what it means, and how it is intended to make schools more safe and affirming places—for all students.

## Notes

1. Heteronormativity refers to “the institutionalized notion and structure of a very particular set of social practices and relationships of identity that are based on and privilege heterosexuality, which in turn, is based on a particular set of ideas about what constitutes gender” (Richardson 2003 as cited in Garcia & Slesaransky-Poe, 2010, p. 247).
2. Throughout this paper, various forms of acronyms are used, depending on the sources to which I refer. In speaking broadly about this community, I use LGBTQ, which refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\* and queer. "Trans\*" is an umbrella term that includes a range of gender identities (e.g., transgender, transsexual, genderqueer) within the gender identity spectrum. “Queer” is also an umbrella term and includes people who are questioning, gender nonconforming and/or who do not identify in any specific category related to gender and sexuality. Both terms are meant to capture the natural spectrum of gender and sexual diversity.
3. While there is some negative commentary in this PDF, this document is actually very helpful as a resource for professional development, as all of the laws here speak to the ways in which California public schools are to be held accountable to support, keep safe, and include LGBTQ people. This resource can be found here: [https://savecalifornia.com/images/stories/PDFs/10\\_calif\\_pubschool\\_lgbtlaws\\_sept2013.pdf](https://savecalifornia.com/images/stories/PDFs/10_calif_pubschool_lgbtlaws_sept2013.pdf).
4. To protect the privacy of participants, I decided not to include these data in the table; given the small number of participants, and other identity markers reported, confidentiality might be sacrificed.
5. While the focus in this article is on FAIR, Seth’s Law had also just been passed. Seth’s Law “strengthens existing state anti-bullying laws to help protect all California public school students. Seth’s Law requires public schools in California to update their anti-bullying policies and programs, and it focuses on protecting students who are bullied based on their actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity/gender expression, as well as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, disability, and religion” ([https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/asset\\_upload\\_file529\\_10688.pdf](https://www.aclunc.org/sites/default/files/asset_upload_file529_10688.pdf)).
6. Since its passage, some parent organizations and groups are trying to overturn FAIR. They have argued that this is a matter of parents’ rights. The letter that I crafted was based on real “concerns” and parent feedback that I found in online articles.
7. Another data source, a deeper analysis of which will be shared in a future article, were student surveys. In the beginning of the year, the students filled out a survey, administered by the school, meant to measure their “internal safety” (Author, in press). This survey consisted of a series of fixed responses items, as well as several open-ended questions. I did quantitative descriptive analysis, identifying patterns and themes in the fixed response questions. For the open-ended responses, I did content analyses, also identifying salient themes. From these preliminary analyses, I created four vignettes to be used in the October PD. These vignettes were meant to be case study students for teachers to consider as they planned lessons, talked through ways to support their students, and to create an overall environment of safety and inclusivity.
8. As part of the mission of Hope, teachers are required to do Participatory Action Research (PAR). This activity was also a way to introduce them to PAR, a request from Laurie, the principal, as I was planning the PD.
9. Laurie mention of the “N word” is in reference to an on-going conversation about the use of racial or homophobic slurs. While we had many conversations that were centered on these slurs and how to address them, in this article, I focus on themes and that arise specifically in conversations regarding the implementation of the FAIR Education Act.
10. For example, one resource that I gave to them was Chapter 4 of Elizabeth Meyer’s *Gender and Sexuality in Education*. This chapter gives ideas and ways to incorporate LGBTQ themes throughout the curriculum.
11. As part of what I’m calling a Community Development model, I did have an evening with parents, in which I talked through the new laws, as well as gender and sexual diversity and how Hope Academy was trying to create safety and inclusivity for all students, and specifically for LGBTQ students and families. To achieve this goal,

Hope's mission was to educate all students on gender and sexual diversity. Data from this evening is presented elsewhere.

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## Conclusion

In 2013, five years after Larry King's murder, *Valentine Road* was released. This documentary aims to tell the story of "two victims: the deceased and the murderer." The film recounts the incidents leading up to the shooting, and chronicles the lives of two young boys, both struggling for a "sense of belonging." The film also includes interviews with friends, family members, jury members, and former teachers of both Brandon and Larry. In an interview with Shirley Brown, one of several teachers, she said, "I do believe Larry... honestly didn't have a clue... the consequences of his actions." She then went on to say, "I relate to Brandon, because I can see myself in that very same position. I don't know if I would have taken a gun..." Then, she chuckled—"but a good, swift kick in the butt might work really well." She explained that Larry had a "special need" and that he was on an "I.E.P."— an "Individualized Educational Program." This program was to help him "extinguish" certain "behaviors" in the classroom. A second teacher, Sue Crowley, then joined the commentary. She explained, "Larry had a behavior goal... *to not do exactly what he was doing*... in the weeks before he died." She said, "It's a legally binding document; it should have been enforced, like any other legal document."

Ms. Brown then shared her expertise: "I've been teaching for 30 years... junior high, always especially, are HOMO-PHOBIC.... I was convinced, that the kids would take it into their own hands since WE DID NOT." She went on to say that she went into the principal's office in the weeks before Larry's murder and said that if he didn't "physically come in there and do something to stop Larry's progression, the boys at this school are going to take him out behind the shed and beat him to death."

Unpacking the insidious commentary above is, for my readers, I hope and believe unnecessary. The implication here is that the school taking "it" into its own hands would have

meant stopping “Larry’s progression”—his development as a human being. The I.E.P.—in all of its legally binding power didn’t seem to work. The relationship between school and society, particularly with respect to LGBTQ people and gender and sexual diversity more broadly, is perhaps inherent in the sentiment of these women. While public opinion about gay marriage<sup>41</sup> has reached a “tipping point” with the majority of North Americans endorsing it (52%), 43% still oppose it<sup>42</sup> (Saad, 2013). No doubt, some of the people who oppose this legislation are teachers, like these fucknuts,<sup>43</sup> and there is a good chance that they would also oppose the FAIR Education Act; there was, disturbingly, no indication from educators that the “progression” of the school space itself, in which Larry King was murdered, should be disrupted.

### **My study: A study of the relationship between theory, policy, and practice**

My dissertation study arose in response to school climates in which a student like Larry King could not only be brutally murdered, but also ignorantly be blamed for the murder. The articles that I present in this dissertation build on each other in important ways. Together, they provide insight into the layers of what it means to provide for students equal educational opportunities that are “worth wanting” (Howe, 1993). In the first article, my aim was to focus on the relationship between theory, policy and practice, in my conceptualization of the Queered Democratic Framework. In this framework, I make the case that democratic policies that promote group rights, such as FAIR, are necessary to make good on principles of equality, justice and fairness; however, I stand with Butler (2004) and her notion of a “double path in

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<sup>41</sup> Gay marriage is perhaps the best indicator of public opinion about gays and lesbians, but, I’d argue, not people who identify as trans\*; this is important, given the tendency to take LGBTQ as a group.

<sup>42</sup> These figures may underestimate the opposition. According to Dr. Richard J. Powell, “social desirability bias” in pre-election surveys may underestimate the opposition by 5- 7 percentage points (Morin, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> I’ll change this in the final draft, but I just have to leave it here for now. Watching the interviews (and the movie) made me want to have a temper tantrum; please accept this, for now, in the spirit of the tantrum.

politics” (p. 37). While the language of categories is necessary for society as it now is, we must continue to critique the limits of social categories and the ways in which they constrain or miss the complexity of identity and of who we all are (becoming). Unique to the QDF is its attention to the ways in which democratic policies are applied and are taken up in practice. In the last strand of this framework, I propose that one way to take this “double path” is through the implementation of a policy such as FAIR. While FAIR, alone, is a policy that aims to include particular groups of people who have been historically marginalized, queering of the implementation of the policy moves beyond mere inclusion and engages students in anti-oppressive education more broadly. To do this work, however, teachers and school communities-at-large need to be supported; I argue, in my second article, that in order for policies like FAIR to be implemented successfully, the soil must be tilled.

In “Tilling the soil,” I make the case that in implementing democratic, inclusive policies like FAIR, that rub up against social norms, several considerations are essential. I argue that lessons learned and insights gained from *Brown v. Board* are critical to FAIR’s success: attention to the relationship between schools and society (Wells, et al, 2004); acknowledgment that the laws themselves may not be enough; recognition that these policies may have negative effects on the students that they are meant to serve (DuBois, 1935; Bell, 2004); and, given the lessons mentioned above, the awareness that working for social change requires relying on all members of the school community-- administrators, teachers, parents and students (Wells & Crain, 1997). In Tilling, I share interventions that were done throughout the year to engage the whole school community of Hope in a “Culture of Conversation.” Employing this Community Development model, I make the case that teachers alone cannot be responsible for the implementation of policies focused on equity when these policies are passed in broader sociopolitical contexts of

inequity. While I argue that the whole school community must be engaged in conversations about GSD for the soil to be tilled for a policy like FAIR, I end this dissertation with a focus on teachers, who are critical to creating safe and inclusive school cultures.

In my final article, I seek to understand the relationship between policy and practice as it plays out in teachers' sense making about the FAIR Education Act. In "Navigating the relationship between policy and practice: Competing discourses of fear and care in teachers' sense making about the FAIR Education Act," I examine the relationship between large-scale social discourses and local, school discourses as it plays out in conversations about gender and sexuality with and among teachers. In examining what happens when teachers were given opportunities to make sense of their roles in attending to topics of gender and sexual diversity, I found that competing discourses of fear and care were at play throughout conversations. While teachers had "caring commitments" to attend to the needs of all of their students and to create safe and inclusive spaces, large-scale social discourses of fear related to GSD were also at play in "fear flares." Understanding this relationship, particularly as it materialized at Hope, provided insight into how large-scale social discourses often function at local levels, in ways that are consequential—politically, ideologically, and culturally. In order to heal the harms caused by heteronormativity, attending to this relationship is critical. Further, it is necessary to prepare and support teachers to overcome the fear that comes along with their responsibility—and their desire-- to include topics of GSD.

### **Lessons Learned: Context, the role of the researcher, and anti-oppression**

In the introduction to this dissertation, I made it clear that merely blaming *this* school, *these* teachers, *this* community—is useless and doesn't solve anything. I remain committed to

this opinion. Yet I wonder what my study would have looked like at Larry's school. Admittedly, I am afraid of people like Ms. Brown. I am afraid that people like her are in our classrooms teaching our students. I am afraid that she may never have had to reflect on her own biases and prejudices, and that she hasn't realized what the consequences of her beliefs could do, and have done, to harm students each and every day at school. I also wonder how many teachers feel the ways that she does—and the resistances or silences that we might feel from them. FAIR passed in California; this includes Oxnard. This democratic policy, meant to end the exclusion of LGBTQ people and history in school spaces, is also meant to contribute to students having opportunities of equal worth (Howe, 1997). How will teachers, who are largely responsible for implementation of this policy, receive this new legislation? What kind of support would a school like Larry's need to put this policy into practice? The answer to the latter question is one that, I believe, is critical to the success of FAIR. Given that oppression looks different in different social contexts, ways of thinking about *tilling the soil* for FAIR must be rooted in a "situated understanding of oppression" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 48), which means that each environment must be assessed and programming must be specific to the unique characteristics of each. The constitution of soil varies by context; attending to this truth, in my mind, is an integral part of FAIR's implementation, and a key lesson that I learned in this study.

I traveled to California with the hope of supporting a community to *till the soil* for an education policy that, I believe, has the potential to make good on promises of equality, fairness, and justice for all students in schools. I wanted to understand what the teachers at Hope thought about doing this work, what they needed, how prepared they felt, what expertise they brought, and what barriers they anticipated. And I wanted to provide the support that they might need to create a school, a middle school, where kids felt safe to be themselves. The teachers who I had

the honor to work with throughout the year at Hope were loving, smart, and committed to creating a safe and inclusive school environment; this was partly due to the fact that *they did* take issues of gender and sexual diversity into their own *loving* hands. The social context within which I conducted my study was one quite different from the one that Larry King had to endure. For the most part, the teachers with whom I worked wanted to do this work, were open to understanding the nuances of how heteronormativity functions daily in school practices, and were committed to reflecting on the ways in which they might be perpetuating dangerous social norms. They were willing to engage in conversations that were sometimes difficult to have and, in holding each other accountable, remained committed to a Culture of Conversation that was respectful and honest. Extending this conversation, through a Community Development model, challenged both students and parents also to engage with topics of gender and sexual diversity. Their responses to follow-up questionnaires, along with what they shared in interviews, seemed to suggest that they agreed that these conversations were important to have. For students, being exposed to topics of GSD seemed to affect their comfort in talking about LGBTQ topics. *Tilling the soil*, at Hope, while not always easy, seemed as if it was a good start to healing the harms caused by heteronormativity (although one year may not have been enough).

The findings that I presented in this dissertation, while representative of one school, have several implications for how we might think about supporting teachers and school communities through the implementation of FAIR. For one, the relationship between schools and society, and between policy and practice, must be considered. The support that the school community of Hope needed, and that they were open to receiving, was indicative to some degree, of soil that was fairly ready for the policy. What we did during the year—with teachers, students, and parents— can be used to inform future professional and Community Development opportunities,

as well as research studies, though not in a prescriptive way. In future studies, assessing the nature of the soil, and developing and studying programming specific to particular contexts might contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of what support teachers and communities need to create spaces safe for the implementation of policies like FAIR—and safe for students.

A second lesson learned from this study, that may have implications for future projects, has to do with my role, as a queer researcher and as the facilitator of these efforts. It is not a new contribution to share that doing professional development, as an outsider to a community, can be problematic. In reflecting on my time at Hope, I often felt like I was an interloper to their community. I developed fairly close connections with many on the staff, but I often felt like we were focusing on *my* agenda, which makes me question the sustainability of the work that we did during the year. Part of creating safe and inclusive spaces, disrupting heteronormativity, as well as other forms of oppression in schools, is caring about doing the work and making it a priority. It's also believing that an integral part of students' experiences in school is how they feel both socially and emotionally, and it's knowing that experiences often differ, in very consequential ways, based on how students identify and/or are identified. The staff at Hope, I know, understood how deeply I cared about these topics and about students in schools who are terribly distressed because of who they are (becoming). I know that they genuinely cared too; but I also know that just like anything else, our own experiences as teachers often influence how we arrange our classrooms, which conversations we want to have, and what we feel passionately about when it comes to supporting our students. This leads to another important lesson.

While I do believe that education around topics of GSD is needed, even perhaps, at times, in isolation, I don't believe that organizing a school community around these topics is the best

way to create safety and inclusivity. The staff at Hope was very diverse, so were the students. While heteronormativity was functioning; so too were issues related to race and social class, not uncommon for most school communities. As Laurie mentioned, at Hope, they did a really nice job of attending to situations that arose. But the focus on GSD, in some ways, seemed to privilege issues related to heteronormativity without taking adequate consideration of other related issues of oppression; I think this was a mistake. If I had the opportunity to do this study again, beyond the initial PD—which was focused on knowledge and critical self-reflection related to GSD—I would organize around oppression in general. Throughout the year, I felt a desire from both teachers and students to talk about and work through issues related to race, for example, and didn't feel like I could really take those up in productive ways. First, I was unprepared, but also, admittedly, I was committed to topics of GSD. I will change this in future programming. Until we recognize the complicated nature of identity, in practice, and how spaces always function to exclude, to marginalize, to privilege, to silence, as well as to celebrate our students, we will continue to keep kids from their own beautiful “progressions” into who they are (becoming).

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## Appendix A

### Parent Interview Protocol

1. What do you think defines a safe school- or what does a safe school look like?
  2. How is that created? In other words, what do teachers, students, parents-- the school community-- have to do to create a space like that?
  3. How do you feel about including issues of identity related to gender and sexual diversity into the academic curriculum? So, in language arts, how would you feel about the teacher using a story about an LGBTQ student or families?
  4. Consider the statistics about LGBTQ students in schools, what do you think needs to happen to make these students feel more safe at school?
  5. Do you have any fears about the implementation of the FAIR education act? (If not, some parents have pushed back on this bill, saying that it promotes a homosexual agenda and that there is no place for this in public schools. What would you say to these parents?)
  6. How important is it that parents are educated on issues on gender and sexual diversity?
  7. What do you think it means to for kids to be “internally safe”—or safe to be themselves? Is this important in school? How is an environment like this created?
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### Student Interview Protocol

#### Bullying

- When you think about someone getting bullied, tell me what you think of.
- Do kids at TCS get bullied?
- Are there certain types of kids here that are “the bullies” or who “get bullied”? Tell me about that.

#### Safety

- Think about what it feels like to feel really safe. Can you describe what that might be like?
- Do you feel safe at TCS? (Maybe push on this a little as it relates to safe to be yourself....)

#### Diversity

- You guys have a lot of different kinds of kids here, which is kind of unique and really special. How’s that going? Do you feel like you all hang out together?
- For example, tell me about lunchtime—who do you sit with? Do you notice certain groups of kids sitting together?
- Do you think it’s possible for this to be different? What would it take for that to happen?



9. Do you feel like you can be yourself at The City School?

Yes

Maybe

No

Please explain below.

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### AAC Parent Questionnaire

*Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your responses help AAC secure funding and improve our work. It will also provide insight into how to improve the school experiences of your kids and strengthen our community.*

*All surveys are anonymous and confidential.*

1. Do you identify as:

\_\_\_\_\_ Male

\_\_\_\_\_ Female

\_\_\_\_\_ transgender, gender queer, gender nonconforming

Not listed \_\_\_\_\_

2. What racial and/or ethnic group(s) are you a member of?

3. Do you know anyone who identifies as Gay, Lesbian, or Bisexual?

Yes

No

4. Do you know anyone who identifies as transgender or transsexual?

Yes

No

5. What is your relationship to the City School? (i.e. parent, guardian, grandparent, etc.)

6. If you are connected to the City School because you have a student in the school, which grade(s) is/ are your student(s) in?

7. Prior to attending this workshop, how familiar were you with issues of gender and sexual diversity in schools?

Very Familiar

Familiar

Somewhat Familiar

Not familiar

8. Prior to attending this workshop, had you heard of:

FAIR Education Act

\_\_\_\_\_yes

\_\_\_\_\_no

Seth's Law \_\_\_\_\_yes \_\_\_\_\_no

If so, what had you heard?

9. Prior to attending this AAC performance, how interested were you in issues of gender and sexuality in schools?

\_\_\_\_\_ Not interested

\_\_\_\_\_ Neither interested or disinterested

\_\_\_\_\_ Interested

10. After attending this AAC performance, how interested are you in topics of gender and sexuality in schools?

\_\_\_\_\_ Not interested

\_\_\_\_\_ Neither interested or disinterested

\_\_\_\_\_ Interested

11. Did the conversation after the performance introduce you to new perspectives on this topic?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Maybe

Please give a brief explanation:

12. Do you think that it's important for schools to introduce issues of gender and sexuality? Did your opinion change after this workshop? Please explain.

13. Do you think this theatrical performance was a useful way of generating conversation on this topic?

\_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ Maybe

14. In comparison to other conversations that you have had or events that you may have attended that focus on issues of identity and social justice, do you believe AAC is...

\_\_\_\_\_ A better way of having in-depth conversations

\_\_\_\_\_ The same as other social justice events

\_\_\_\_\_ A less effective way of having in-depth conversations

***Please share with us any thoughts you have about this presentation and/ or performance. We want to hear your feedback!***

## Appendix B

Hey there,

As Laurie mentioned, I'm coming out next week and will be interviewing some kids. As you all know, my focus is on gender and sexual diversity specifically, but more broadly, I am interested in school climate and culture-- and how to create a culture in which all students, in all of their diversity, can thrive and feel safe and supported. I see it there-- happening, and I think that what you all are doing this year, as hard as it may seem sometimes, is worth writing about and sharing with others who aim to do the same.

So, in the interest of understanding the school culture from the perspective of the kids, I'd like to interview... probably 15-20 total (but maybe more...) throughout the rest of the semester. What I want is a diverse group-- students who you think feel completely safe and those who may not feel so safe-- and by safe, I mean more "internally safe"-- to be themselves. So, if you can please send me the names of 3 students (and their grade levels)-- with this idea in mind-- and please give me a couple of sentences as to why you chose these students. Also, if you are interested in anything related to safety, climate, culture, etc. that you want me to explore with your students, I'd love to do so, so please send me any ideas.

Thanks so much. I look forward to seeing you soon.

Much respect-  
Bethy

**Appendix C**

In my classes, we have conversations about issues of identity such as sexual orientation.

I am comfortable having conversations about issues of identity such as sexual orientation.

**The question below was only included on the post-survey.**

My school is a safe place for students who identify as gay or lesbian.

## Appendix D

Dear Hope Academy Parents and Families,

On Tuesday December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2012, we will have a parent meeting/ workshop in which we will discuss out school culture and student safety. The common narrative right now about “safe schools” is focused almost exclusively on bullying, which is seen as the root cause of schools that are not safe and there is a national effort to stop bullying behavior.

At Hope, we go beyond discussions of bullying as the root cause of unsafe schools. We want to create a school where kids, of course, are safe from bullies, but also where they are *safe to be themselves*. We want to create an environment that is inclusive and in which difference and diversity are welcomed and valued. To create this type of culture, we, as a community, have discussions that help us understand one another, and we try to teach our students to come to these conversations with curiosity and not judgment.

Over the past several years, many students who identify or who were perceived to be Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, or Transgender (LGBT) have been victims of abuse at school, and too many have taken their own lives. These students were as young as eleven and twelve years old. At Hope, we take this very seriously and are working to create a school environment that is safe and inclusive for all students.

On December 4<sup>th</sup>, we invite you, our parents and families, to engage in an educative discussion as we talk about bullying, and school culture in general, as well as two new California bills that were created in an effort to make schools more safe and welcoming for all students, particularly LGBT students and students who are gender nonconforming: Senate Bill 48, the FAIR Education Act and Seth’s Law.

Several guests will be joining our discussion. Bethy Leonardi is a former teacher (who taught for me at Foundations School Community) and a PhD Candidate at the University of Colorado Boulder. Bethy is doing her dissertation at the City School, working with teachers on school safety and climate related to gender and sexual diversity. Rebecca Brown-Adelman and Trent Norman are colleagues of Bethy’s who specialize in interactive theater and who run the Affinity Arts Consulting.

Please join us!

## Appendix E

In my classes, we have conversations about issues of identity such as sexual orientation.

	Never	Sometimes	A lot	Always
Pre-survey N=136	40%	38%	13%	9%
Post-survey N=171	11%	44%	29%	16%

I am comfortable having conversations about issues of identity such as sexual orientation.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Pre-survey N= 125	23%	15%	46%	16%
Post-survey N=180	5%	10%	38%	47%

**Questions below were only included on the post-survey.**

My school is a safe place for students who identify as gay or lesbian.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Post-survey N=180	7%	17%	43%	33%