Spring 1-1-2015

Making Space for Unsanctioned Texts: The Queer Sensibility of Youth in the Construction of High School Writing Assignments

Michael Wenk
University of Colorado at Boulder, michael.wenk@colorado.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/educ_gradetds

Part of the Creative Writing Commons, Curriculum and Instruction Commons, and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.colorado.edu/educ_gradetds/72
MAKING SPACE FOR UNSANCTIONED TEXTS:
THE QUEER SENSIBILITY OF YOUTH IN THE CONSTRUCTION
OF HIGH SCHOOL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

by

MICHAEL WENK

B.A., University of Michigan Ann Arbor, 1990
M.A., University of Colorado Denver, 2000

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
of the requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education, Curriculum & Instruction – Literacy Studies

2015
This thesis entitled:
Making Space for Unsanctioned Texts:
The Queer Sensibility of Youth in the Construction of High School Writing Assignments written by Michael Wenk has been approved for the School of Education

__________________________
Dr. Anne DiPardo

__________________________
Dr. sj Miller

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.

IRB protocol #14-0013
Schools consistently prove to be unwelcoming environments for queer students. Queer issues and identities are often marginalized or even erased from curricula, putting queer youth at risk (Nieto, 2011). Utilizing a methodology known as student voice research, the principal investigator of this study formed a Curriculum Design Team where teachers and students collaborated in the construction of writing assignments that offer opportunities to explore queer issues and identities. The team capitalized on teacher expertise and empathy as well as the unique perspectives and experiences, or queer sensibility, of seven members of a high school Gay-Straight Alliance (G.S.A.). Participants examined how non-normative identities were materialized or foreclosed in their school’s curriculum, and developed writing assignments that promoted visibility, exploration, critique, and affirmation of Discourses (Gee, 2010) that affect queer youth. Students who participated in the study advocated for choice and modeling when writing is assigned, so that youth in schools have the opportunity to select queer topics as they study historical events or analyze literature. Student participants suggested that by providing a set of options that include queer topics or issues, teachers can communicate to students that exploring sexuality or gender is safe. Students in the study brought a queer sensibility to the meetings of the Curriculum Design Team, which impacted meeting dynamics as well as how teachers took up Discourses impacting queer youth. Meeting and interview transcripts provided a rich source of ethnographic data for Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010), as a means to study how power is manifested through the language of curriculum, multiliteracies, and meeting dynamics.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Darrell B. Watson; my parents, Barbara A. Wenk and Richard D. Wenk; and to queer youth who are once and always in a state of becoming.
I would like to acknowledge Dr. sj Miller and Dr. Elizabeth Dutro for their ongoing feedback and keen editorial eyes as I wrote and revised my dissertation.

I also would like to acknowledge Dr. Anne DiPardo for spending many hours during her retirement, proofing draft after draft and offering perceptive feedback on the content of this dissertation.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the students and staff of Coolidge High School for inviting me into their building and into their lives, and for collecting and analyzing data alongside me.
Contents

Chapters

I. Introduction......................................................................................................................... 1
   a. Consequences of Heteronormativity and Homophobia in Schools.... 2
   b. The Role of Educators: Marginalizing and Marginalized............ 4
   c. The Curricular Marginalization of Queer Students...................... 7
   d. A Coalition of Curriculum Builders.................................................. 9

II. Theoretical Framework................................................................................................. 12
   a. Intelligible Performances in Schools........................................... 12
   b. Materializing Identities through Discourses............................. 15
   c. Rupture in School Discourses.................................................... 18

III. Literature Review........................................................................................................ 23
   a. The Absence of Queer Issues and Identities in the Classroom: Teacher Efficacy or Complacency?........................................... 25
   b. Promoting a Bottom Up Approach to Curriculum Development................................................................................................. 30
   c. Critical Pedagogy: Affordances and Constraints........................ 35
   d. Writing as a Key Component of Critical Literacy........................ 37
   e. Student-Faculty Curriculum Teams............................................. 41
   f. Emphasizing Agency over Victimization: Queer Students Speak to Power......................................................................................... 43

IV. Methods.......................................................................................................................... 47
   a. Research Methodology................................................................. 47
   b. Study Design................................................................................... 48
   c. Setting............................................................................................. 50
   d. Participants..................................................................................... 53
   e. Data Collection.............................................................................. 61
   f. Data Analysis.................................................................................. 72
   g. Role of Researcher.......................................................................... 82
V. Results: Mediating and Enacting Performances through the Construction of Writing Assignments .......................................................................................................................... 85
   a. Introduction ........................................................................................................ 85
   b. Inadequate Experiences with Writing Assignments at Coolidge........ 88
      i. Queer topics: “Easier to avoid than address”....................................... 88
      ii. Exploring queer topics: “That was of my own choice”.......... 89
      iii. Extracurriculars: “My favorite part of being at Coolidge”.. 91
      iv. Free writing: “It’s beautiful what they can do”................. 93
   c. The Utility of Choice in Making Space for Queer Performances via Writing Assignments ................................................................. 94
      i. Standards and choice ................................................................. 94
      ii. Legal Discourses, community pressure, and choice .......... 98
      iii. The Educational marketplace and choice ......................... 103
   d. Modeling as Integral for More Inclusive Writing Assignments ......106
      i. Choice and modeling in student meetings............................. 108
      ii. Choice and modeling in the first CDT meeting.................... 111
      iii. Choice and modeling in social studies............................... 114
      iv. Choice and modeling in language arts............................... 117
   e. Finessing Choice & Modeling: Student & Teacher Perspectives ....120
      i. Stepping outside school-sanctioned texts ............................ 120
      ii. Plotting a course between ignorance and indoctrination.... 124
   f. Teacher Takeaways: “Now You Can Write About It” ............... 129
   g. Student Reflections: “Build Something Better” ......................... 133
   h. Chapter Conclusion ........................................................................... 135
VI. Results: Queer Sensibility for the Straight Curriculum...................... 139
   a. Introduction ......................................................................................... 139
   b. Meeting Dynamics ............................................................................ 141
      i. Turn taking ................................................................................. 142
      ii. Roles played by teachers during meetings ............................ 145
         1. Ms. Wright: Facilitating the experts ................................... 145
         2. Mr. Jones: Comfortable collaboration ................................. 148
iii. The role played by students during meetings..........................150
iv. Humor as a queer sensibility..............................................152
v. Language with a queer sensibility........................................154
   1. Revoicing as student prerogative.................................155
   2. Self-correction strategy...............................................158
   3. Recasting errors as communal activity..........................159
   4. Identity work...................................................................161
c. The Queer Knowledge of Youth: Lessons from Learners.......162
d. The Knowledge of Queer Youth: Discourses from Outside In....173
   i. Characteristics of student knowledge...............................173
   ii. Contesting and embracing Discourses............................178
       1. Visibility.....................................................................179
       2. What does it mean to be queer?.................................184
       3. We are all the same..................................................191
e. Chapter Conclusion............................................................193
VII. Conclusion........................................................................195
   a. Mediating Choice............................................................195
   b. Troubling the Term Ally..................................................198
   c. Refining Curricular Standpoint Theory..............................203
d. Discursive Ecologies and Queer Youth.................................208
e. Queer Youth Attunement: Dialed into Different Frequencies....211
f. Final Thoughts.....................................................................216

References..............................................................................218
Appendices............................................................................239
Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Profile of student participants</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Overview of interviews and meetings</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Alignment of research questions with data collection methods</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Preliminary interview questions for teachers and students</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Exit interview questions for teachers and students</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Overview of meeting participation</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Data analysis activities</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Levels of analysis</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Patterns in data identified by Aria, Leah, and Mike</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Turn taking in Curriculum Design Team meetings</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Questions to guide development of writing assignments</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Principles from “A Queer Literacy Framework”</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

*A difference which does not announce itself, which they do not quite anticipate and cannot fit into any single varying compartment of their catalogued world; a difference they keep on measuring with inadequate sticks designed for their own morbid purpose.*

-Trinh, 1991, p.16

Recounting his experience as a queer teen in Arkansas, Kyle Dean Massey writes, “I was made to believe I was odd and weird and different to the point where it was debilitating. I was so consumed with being gay then. It was on my mind constantly. I was always thinking, ‘If I walk this way, or talk this way, or dress this way…will people think I’m gay?’” (p. 175). Stewart Taylor, who like Massey shared his story as part of the *It Gets Better* campaign, attempted to fit in as a middle school student by growing his hair out, acting more “manly,” listening to certain singers on his iPod, and bragging of sexual encounters with girls (p. 117). Students who exhibit “gender nonconformance” (Blount, 2005, p. 8) historically have been marginalized in schools, where “straightness, compulsory heterosexuality, and by extension heterosexism, are quietly nurtured … in much the same way that team pride is built by the football players wearing suits and ties on game day” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 81). Students like Massey and Taylor perform masculine customs to reconcile their inward sense of difference with the institutionalized heteronormativity of schools. Defying norms relating to gender and sexuality can elicit homophobic responses from peers and educators alike, so fitting in for many students is a

---

1 I use the term *queer* in lieu of *gay* or *LGBT* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) or other terms because queer encompasses the ever-growing initializations used to anoint a person’s sexuality or capture a person’s gender (Boellstorff, 2007). According to Miller (2015), “Queer is not relegated to LGBT*IAACQ people, but is inclusive of any variety of experience that transcends what has been socially and politically accepted as normative categories for gender and sexual orientation” (p. 38). The term queer also signifies a
often matter of survival.

In this introduction, I describe the consequences of heteronormativity and homophobia for students and teachers in schools. Allen (2011) defines heteronormativity as a dominant ideology that “values and normalizes heterosexual identity while stigmatizing individuals who do not identify as heterosexual” (p. 33). Homophobia, according to the Anti-Defamation League, is “the hatred or fear of homosexuals - that is, lesbians and gay men - sometimes leading to acts of violence and expressions of hostility” (2001, para. 1). I discuss how queer students are marginalized in schools, particularly in regard to curriculum. I describe the tenuous position educators find themselves in, with regard to addressing queer identities and issues in their classrooms while maintaining their positions in schools where they are employed. Finally, in this introduction, I briefly frame my study, in which students from a high school Gay-Straight Alliance (G.S.A.) and two teachers collaboratively construct writing assignments that attempt to mediate non-normative performances of sexuality and gender in schools.

**Consequences of Heteronormativity and Homophobia in Schools**

For many students, but especially for queer students, harassment is a fact of life while attending school. The 2013 National School Climate Survey conducted by GSLENN contains some troubling findings:

- 74.1% of queer students reported being verbally harassed, 36.2% reported being physically harassed and 16.5% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation;
- 55.2% of queer students reported being verbally harassed, 22.7% reported being physically harassed and 11.4% reported being physically assaulted at
school in the past year because of their gender expression;

- 71.4% of queer students heard "gay" used in a negative way (e.g., "that's so gay") and 64.5% heard homophobic remarks (e.g., "dyke" or "faggot") frequently or often at school;

- more than half of queer students (55.5%) reported feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation; and nearly 4 in 10 (37.8%) felt unsafe because of their gender expression; and,

- transgender youth reported discrimination in regard to their preferred name, attire, and bathroom. (pp. xvi-xviii)

According to the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and Movement Advancement Project, “lesbian, gay and bi adolescents and adults have two to six times higher rates of reported suicide attempts compared to comparable straight people” (2011, p. 2). The GLAADMAP report describes depression and discrimination as risk factors for suicide among queer people, and asserts “there is growing evidence that the two factors are linked” (2011, p. 2). Higher absenteeism and lower academic achievement are also cited by the report as consequences of harassment for queer students. Often, queer students drop out of school, or more accurately, leave because schools “push out” students who don’t fit in (Smith, 2013).

Unfortunately, many queer students drop out because they do not feel safe at school, where their identities are marginalized through heteronormative Discourses. Gee (2010) describes Discourses (with a capital ‘D’) as “ways of combining and integrating language, actions, interactions, ways of thinking, believing, valuing, and using various symbols, tools, and objects to enact a particular sort of socially recognizable identity” (p.
Discourses with a capital ‘D’ are “ways of being in the world” (Gee, 2012, p. 3). In classrooms, cafeterias, playgrounds, and hallways, students are compelled through privileged Discourses to speak, act, and dress in the “right” way (Gee, 2010, p. 28). Safe spaces, where alternative Discourses about sexuality may not be strictly compartmentalized or categorized, are often limited to afterschool visits to the classroom of a sympathetic teacher or to weekly meetings of the Gay-Straight Alliance (if there is one). As sexuality is produced through Discourses, queer teens like Kyle Dean Massey and Stewart Taylor find their queer identities are discursively “foreclosed” (Butler, 1993, p. 3).

Queer identities are largely purged from school curricula (Murray, 2015), by queer and heterosexual educators alike, as a result of personal beliefs teachers hold about sexuality, professional assessments about what can be taught in the context of community values, or the imposition of mandated curriculum. Nieto (2011) writes, “There is a pervasive and impenetrable silence concerning lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in most schools, not just in the curriculum but also in extracurricular activities. The result is that gay and lesbian students, as well as those with family members who identify as LGBT, are placed at risk in terms of social well-being and academic achievement” (p. 49). Queer identities are marginalized by dominant heterosexual ideologies ingrained in school culture, which impacts not only queer students but queer teachers, too.

The Role of Educators: Marginalizing and Marginalized

Because “the whole social order is behind them” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 74), educators wield significant power in the lives of queer youth. Yet educators are also
bound by the same gender norms that apply to students, and they must also find their place within school structures. For many teachers, adhering to gender norms doesn’t require any soul-searching: it’s common sense, natural, the way things are. But queer teachers or teachers who are allies of queer youth run a considerable risk when they challenge the social order of school. According to Bourdieu (1993), “not anyone can assert anything, or else does so at his peril” (p. 74). For queer teachers, discussing sexuality can be interpreted by the community as recruiting children into the “gay lifestyle,” or worse, as sexual overtures. For allies, associating with or showing empathy for queer youth can call into question their sexuality or morality. How teachers deal with sexuality has much to do with their “habitus” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 77) in a school. Bourdieu (1989) describes habitus as the production of practices and the perception of those practices, based on one’s position in social space as well as their perception of others in social space. To be safe in their jobs and to stay on the right side of their colleagues and community, most teachers operate within the boundaries of the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990, p.151) when it comes to sexuality and gender, because society has determined for them “what it will be possible or not possible to say” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 77). Schools are in the business of transmitting cultural capital – what Bourdieu (1989) describes as goods and dispositions – so that teachers are expected to promulgate dominant values, which are reproduced year after year in the hallways, classrooms, and practice fields of our nation’s schools (Nieto & Bode, 2011). While Bourdieu uses cultural capital to explore academic inequality based on class, statistics about the experiences of queer youth in schools paint a similar picture: queer youth don’t see themselves positively portrayed in the curriculum, in large part because many
teachers feel discursively muzzled when it comes to discussing sexuality and gender in schools or implementing queer curriculum in the classroom.

Queer teachers have faced and continue to face serious consequences for acting queer, identifying as queer, or engaging in same-sex relationships. According to Blount (2005), legislation passed in California after World War II required police to notify both the state licensure board and local superintendents when homosexual sting operations netted teachers. California is also notorious for the Briggs Initiative of 1978, which proposed banning openly gay teachers from the classroom (Blount, 2005). In 1988, a conservative religious group in North Carolina attempted to assert its vision for the local schools, declaring that teachers must undergo AIDS and drug testing, must be examined to see if they have any “homosexual way,” and must pronounce themselves Christians (Blount, 2005, p. 8). Even in the 21st century, queer teachers “risk ostracism, parental outrage, punishment, and even dismissal” (Blount, 2005, p. 1). For example, during a presentation I gave at the Whole Language Umbrella conference in St. Louis in 2012, a high school English teacher asserted that her queer colleague had been asked by school administrators to find employment elsewhere because he was not hiding his sexuality (Wenk, 2012). Thus, both historically and presently, for queer teachers to “remain above reproach, they must modify any personal behavior, fashion, relationship, or other facet of their lives that might cast doubt on their sexual orientation or gender identity” (Blount, 2005, p. 1). These instances of open hostility toward queer teachers, taken with more common and less publicized forms of heteronormativity, send a loud and clear message to queer teachers everywhere: you are not fit to teach in schools. As a result, queer students lose valuable role models and also lose opportunities to explore non-normative
identities in curriculum.

The Curricular Marginalization of Queer Students

Gee (2010) explains that Discourse is “a socially situated practice” that constitutes a “socially situated identity” (p. 30; italics original). The construction of identity within the language employed by a social group is central to Gee’s notion of Discourse. In schools, curriculum contributes to Discourses that construct heterosexual identities for students while marginalizing queer identities. Books are not taught and issues are not broached due to Discourses that operate in service of “institutionalized masculinity” (Hall, 2003, p. 365). A Spanish textbook, for example, depicts a family in the traditional sense: the family tree shows mom and dad, grandfather and grandmother, aunts and uncles – all paired off as heterosexual couples (see, for example, Puntos de Partida, 2012, p. 60).

Savage (2011) writes that “acknowledging the existence of LGBT people, even in sex ed curriculums, is hugely controversial” (p. 4). One of the chief targets of homophobic censorship in schools is literature. Often, texts are kept from students because they portray queer characters engaged in relationships: “The banning of picture books with prominent gay characters…makes it clear that same-sex relationships alone—not language or sexual content—are what give many people pause” (Whelan, 2009, para. 26). Books with queer themes, like And Tango Makes Three (Parnell & Richardson, 2005) and The Perks of Being a Wallflower (Chbosky, 1999), are regularly challenged in communities across the country (The Huffington Post, 2012). Even extracurricular activities are sanitized of queer relationships: at Bel Air High School in Baltimore, school district officials attempted to remove a scene called “They Fell” from the school’s

The scene features two male characters who discover they are in love with each other and humorously share that discovery. It includes no references to sexual activity, nor do the characters engage in any sexually suggestive behavior in the scene. In fact, the scene is less suggestive than other scenes in the play that depict characters falling in love who kiss, remove clothing, then leave the stage in a suggestion of sexual activity. The students believe that the only reason “They Fell” was removed from BADC’s performance, while the rest of the play was left intact, is fear of the expression of same-sex love or gay identity.

Only after pressure from students and the ACLU did the school district reverse its position and allow the play to be performed uncensored (Dagger News Service, 2011). In many ways, schools consistently prove to be unwelcoming environments for the performance of queer identities, with harmful consequences for queer students.

In a nation that is becoming increasingly diverse, students should be able to see themselves reflected in the curriculum of their classes, particularly via school literacies that are deeply ingrained in teaching and learning. In the past, educators have responded to calls for diversity by selecting multicultural texts, creating lessons and units that honor difference, celebrating international holidays, and even implementing ethnic studies courses. However, many teachers today are “ill equipped for the changing demographics in their classrooms” and “unsure about how to navigate the new complexion of their classes” (Jacobsen, Frankenberg, & Lenhoff, 2012, p. 814). Changing demographics
include more families headed by same-sex couples, who, just like heterosexual couples, attend parent-teacher conferences and support their children at extracurricular activities. Given the changing demographics, Thein (2013) wondered why English teachers who were generally sympathetic toward queer students didn’t incorporate queer themes and issues in their classrooms. One reason teachers gave is, “I don’t know how” (Thein, 2013, p. 176). Perhaps due to what Britzman (1995) calls “proliferating identifications” (p. 158) that are constructed by and constructed for students, many literacy teachers – who might be willing to do more – feel unprepared to incorporate queer issues and identities in lesson and units that have been historically constructed as straight.

**A Coalition of Curriculum Builders**

Britzman (1995) inquires, “What is required to refuse the unremarked and obdurately unremarkable straight educational curriculum?” (p. 151) My dissertation addresses issues of sexuality, gender, and school Discourses, particularly as Discourses construct performances via school writing assignments. School, as a social institution, is replete with examples of events and relationships undergirded by asymmetrical power dynamics: knowledge flows from teacher to student, texts are distributed without dialogue about their merit, and classroom discourse closely follows an initiation-response-evaluation pattern (Rogers, 2011) in most instructional settings. And yet, even as texts and practices are reproduced within a school, day after day and year after year, students and educators are capable of creating novel texts and engaging in new practices; improvisation happens endlessly (Fairclough, 2010). This study capitalized on creative impulses to mitigate some of the negative effects of top down curricular mandates and dominant school Discourses. My dissertation research study also provided opportunities
for queer students and teachers to critique “naturalized ideological representations” (Fairclough, 2010, p. 28) as represented in literacy activities. In this study, critiquing curriculum as it is gave way to designing curriculum as queer students and their teachers perceived it should be.

Questions guiding this study included:

- How do members of the Curriculum Design Team (e.g., queer youth, allies, and teachers) understand the role of high school writing assignments in contributing to the construction and performance of gender and sexuality?
- What Discourses and identities emerge as participants collaborate to develop writing assignments that explore gender and sexuality?
- In what ways do curricular artifacts produced by teachers and queer students foster visibility and accessibility of non-normative performances of gender and sexuality via writing assignments?

As students and educators collaborated on the construction of writing assignments, their work highlighted how identities can be materialized or foreclosed in curricular Discourses. In the following chapters, I show how this study could contribute to understanding Discourses about sexuality and gender as queer students contend with heteronormativity and homophobia in their schools and as the implementation of Common Core standards presents an opportunity to insert queer issues and identities into curriculum via writing assignments. I offer a review of studies in which students contribute to the development of curriculum, particularly in regard to literacy practices. I describe my research methods, which relied on the participation of the researcher in the
process of co-constructing writing assignments, as well as the participation of students and teachers in the process of generating and analyzing data. Finally, I share findings in regard to student recommendations for inserting queer issues and identities into writing assignments, as well as a queer sensibility that student participants brought to their meetings with teachers. In my study, subjects, in this case, a community of high school students and teachers, met “to name the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1993, p. 167).
Theoretical Framework

For the theoretical framework informing my study, I show how Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity lends itself to the exploration and enactment of identity via the Discourses of writing assignments in literacy classrooms, offering queer and straight students opportunities to critique, contest, disrupt, and affirm queer identities. I describe the role of mediation from sociocultural perspectives on learning, exploring ways that teachers (as allies) mediate Discourses that introduce, affirm, and contest identities for students in their classrooms (Johnston, 2004; Moll, 2000; Smagorinsky, 2011). Later, in the findings section, I describe the ways that students in the study mediated Discourses for teacher participants during meetings where curriculum was developed collaboratively. The collaborative development of writing assignments became a means for teachers and students to make meaning discursively in regard to queer issues and identities. Without the aid of students, teacher performances as curriculum-builders become congealed, so that teachers are only able to cite past practices instead of imagining writing assignments for students as emancipatory performances.

Intelligible Performances in Schools

How do heteronormative and homophobic school environments come to erase performances of queer identities from curriculum? Gender is a social construct: an individual's gender is “forcibly materialized” (Butler, 1993, p. 1), beginning at birth when people in the delivery room hear the obstetrician say, “It's a girl!” (Butler, 1990, p. 151). Traits of femininity and masculinity are mapped onto an individual. Thus, gender is “understood…in relation to the kinds of discourses that circulate in a given time and place” (Ehrlich, 2007, p. 453). Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity describes how
an individual, or subject, is materialized through a “sustained set of acts” (p. xv). In order

to maintain one's gender identity – within norms of masculinity and femininity and in

compliance with expectations for the categories of man or woman, boy or girl –

individuals like Kyle Dean Massey and Stewart Taylor, for example, cite past practices in

their performances. An individual is a product of history, “derivative” of everything that

came before (Butler, 1993, p. 13). Through repetition and ritual (Butler, 1990), an

individual’s performance contributes to their gendered subjectivity and also reifies

naturalized notions of masculinity and femininity. Identity is constructed socially, rather

than through the acts of a rational and self-governing being. Instead a being – a subject –

is materialized at a nexus of power, a moment when a subject is rendered intelligible or

unintelligible.

Subjects that are not intelligible – because “an ideology has simplified the

sociolinguistic field” – are erased via censorship, legal means, or forms of violence

(Irvine, 2001, p. 33). For example, Congress considered the marriage of a woman to a

woman as unintelligible; by enacting the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, Congress was

able to erase same-sex relationships from social, legal, and financial Discourses

throughout the United States. Another example of intelligibility is “passing,” in which

“closeted gay men and lesbians who have not yet come out to others, may strive

consciously to pass as heterosexual” (Speer & Green, 2007, p. 337). As Kyle Dean

Massey and Stewart Taylor carefully constructed their gender performances as teenagers,

they endured the strain of continually having to cite markers of masculinity as a means to

gain acceptance from peers and adults. As a teacher in a same-sex relationship, I kept no

pictures on my desk of my partner and me; instead, I displayed photos showing me
snowboarding with friends or mountain biking with my brother. Thus, passing is not just acting a certain way: it is also not acting a certain way. Weidman believes “erasure is at work whenever a standard, or ideal, is constructed” (2007, p. 148). According to Foucault, a regulatory ideal – boys wear blue and girls wear pink – serves as a productive power (Butler, 1993), because when people see an infant wearing blue clothing, they immediately conclude that the gender is male. The impulse is to include rather than exclude by “bringing anomalies under scientific norms” (Dreyfus, 1996, para. 38). The limits placed on performances, such as what we wear and how we speak, have the power to produce gender.

In schools, curriculum serves as a productive power, where heterosexual identities are materialized and non-normative sexualities are rendered unintelligible. Binaries are enforced so that a same-sex crush portrayed in a student memoir is taboo, for example, while a boy’s story of falling in love with a girl is held out as a prized narrative. Class discussions about the works of Shakespeare tend to explore the heteronormative relationship between Juliet and Romeo’s romantic love but avoid non-normative desire in sonnets that are addressed to a young man. A more glaring and distressing example of unintelligibility might be how transgender students never see themselves represented in any text, nor are they often implicitly or explicitly sanctioned to be able to represent themselves in a writing assignment, during the entirety of their K-12 schooling (Miller, forthcoming). As described earlier, these limits on performativity undermine the health and academic achievement of many students. Educators have an ethical responsibility to provide space in curriculum for the materialization of queer identities, so that queer students achieve more positive outcomes when enrolled in school.
Materializing Identities through Curricular Discourses

Reading and writing assignments offer a prime opportunity for queer students to move from the margins of Discourses into the realm of intelligibility. Thought is materialized (not just expressed) through words (Smagorinsky, 2011). Language mediates our thinking. Effective reading and writing instruction finds meaning in the idea that learning is social and that knowledge has cultural and historical origins (Smagorinsky, 2011). Sociocultural theory offers teachers of reading and writing a way to view reading and writing as communal activities that foster the development of language as well as identities. For Brandt and Clinton (2002), dialogue among members of a classroom community is “the primary medium for teaching reading and writing and for negotiating understandings of written language” (p. 341), a perspective that challenges traditional Discourses about literacy instruction. Since this study focuses so substantially on Discourses – as they relate to curriculum, sexuality, and learning—sociocultural understandings of the discursive nature of meaning-making are central to my conceptual framework.

Holland et al. (1998) characterize Vygotsky’s work as “engagement with the potential of symbols to affect and reorganize experience” (p. 6). The organization of experience through language – a communal enterprise – constructs identities for individuals. Identity is achieved discursively via a “normative ideal” rather than projected by an individual as a “descriptive feature of experience” (Butler, 1990, p. 23). Through Discourses, individuals perform “a socially recognizable identity” and their performances sustain Discourses (Gee, 2010, p. 29). Discourses produce a “system of compulsory heterosexuality,” of which school is a part, which limits “the production of identities
along the axis of heterosexual desire” (Butler, 1990, p. 36). By enacting heterosexual identities, queer students in school repress language, beliefs, and behavior that fall outside gender boundaries, a means to achieve social positions in schools that are both desirable and intelligible. Performances that are neither desirable nor intelligible are positioned as deviant. In schools, there is a cost to fitting in as well as standing out.

Discourses flow through in-school and out-of-school spaces in ways that influence practices that occur within classroom walls. Teachers and students go to school each day involved in what Gee (2010) calls “recognition work”:

There is a way of being a kindergarten student in Ms X’s class with its associated activities and ways with words, deeds, and things. Ms X, her students, her classroom, with its objects and artifacts, and characteristic practices (activities), are all in the Discourse she and her students create.

(p. 37)

And, Gee (2010) adds, as teachers and students coordinate Discourses in the classroom, they are being “coordinated by other people, things, tools, technologies, symbol systems, places, and times” (p. 40). Because this coordination often goes unnoticed and unquestioned – “that’s just how we do things” – norms are unthinkingly reproduced in innumerable performances. By questioning the boundaries that constrain recognition work, or by engaging in different kinds of recognition work, schools might truly promote inclusivity of identities that have been historically oppressed.

While performances reify Discourses and identities, Gee (2010) explains, “Like a dance, the performance here and now is never exactly the same” (p. 36). In the same way an utterance is reproduced but also altered from speaker to speaker (Bakhtin, 1982),
performances lend themselves to intelligible identities (or subjectivities) like *drag queen* or *talk show host*, even as each performance is (perhaps imperceptibly) novel in its own way. The “coherent, unified, and originary subject” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 7) is a Western myth; instead, improvised performances lead to the construction of identities “that cannot rightfully be said to originate or end” (Butler, 1990, p. 45). Even congealed Discourses are vulnerable to their own instability, because Discourses are ongoing and never reproduced in quite the same manner (Butler, 1990). According to Holland et al. (1998), humans in groups and as individuals “often move themselves—led by hope, desperation, or even playfulness, but certainly by no rational plan—from one set of socially and culturally formed subjectivities to another” (pp. 6-7). While Discourses emerge and evolve and die all the time, some scholars, like Lankshear and Knobel (2003) and Cazden (1996), feel many schools are stuck in unproductive Discourses that are slow to evolve and even slower to die. Dominant Discourses in schools, particularly in regard to sexuality, constrain the exploration and enactment of non-normative identities among queer students.

Limitations are also placed on learning when educators ignore the infinite incarnations of literacy. That is, literacies play out in all sorts of social situations. All students suffer under the yoke of an autonomous view of literacy, which portrays students as working to acquire a universal set of skills, rather than engaging in a host of literacy practices (Street, 2003). The autonomous model of literacy characterizes students as either literate or illiterate, and does not recognize literacy as context-dependent; rather, there is one form of literacy that works in all contexts. Ingrained in the “deep grammar of schooling” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 28), this cognitive, behavioral, and/or
deterministic view portrays literacy as a neutral skill that, once obtained, “will have effects on other social and cognitive practices” (Street, 2003, p. 77). The autonomous view of literacy ignores the literacies that students employ in countless situations each day, in and out of school. Embracing multiple, fluid, and diverse literacies in schools is a means to incorporate Discourses that include rather than exclude multiple, fluid, and diverse identities.

**Rupture in School Discourses**

In schools today, the grip of autonomous literacy is being contested exponentially and forcefully, not just by literacy scholars, but also by students whose home literacies clash with school literacies, and by the proliferation of new media technologies that students experience in their out-of-school lives. “Schools and classrooms,” write Lankshear and Knobel (2003), “are among the last places one would expect to find ‘new literacies’ ” (p. 6). And yet, unsanctioned literacies appear in schools incessantly, sometimes in the form of *counterscript*, for example, when students “resist the normative institutional practices of the classroom” by speaking or writing Spanish even though it is prohibited (Gutierrez & Stone, 2000, p. 156). Rupture in school-sanctioned literacies also occurs when school Discourses are appropriated by students, what Foucault (1978) calls “reverse discourse” (p. 101). An example might be when a student draws attention to a teacher’s spelling error, seizing on prescriptive Discourses modeled extensively by the teacher.

Queer identities continue to materialize in schools, despite efforts to erase them: “straightness is performed and nursed so that it may perpetuate itself, but queer happens” (Whitlock, 2007, p. 87). Butler (1990) explains that the “persistence and proliferation” of
non-conforming gender identities offers “critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims” of a heterosexual regime (p. 24). Schools have historically reproduced heteronormativity, at a huge cost to queer students. At a time when schools are engaged in anti-bullying efforts, identifying homophobia as a product of gender norms enforced not only by school bullies but also by rigid school curriculum is a step toward abolishing “compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler, 1990, p. 24). By “acknowledging the differences that children bring to school” (Nieto, 2012, p. 157), educators can support the materialization of an entire spectrum of students who otherwise risk erasure.

Queer theory in general and the concept of performativity more specifically offer a means to deconstruct the “ritualized production” (Butler, 1993, p. 95) of gender. Performativity, as a concept, enables young people and adults who are constituted by and contribute to powerful Discourses to question power structures and to denaturalize what is given, or what is considered “common sense.” When we consider the performative nature of gender, we begin to recognize the discursive norms that organize and order our lives and we are better equipped to evaluate the stances individuals take in terms of the performance of gender. Deconstructing performativity helps to contest Discourses that enforce binaries (heterosexual/homosexual) and that perpetuate the essentialization of gender. Rather than attempting to define what a woman or a man is, we might ask, “How did gender come to make a difference?” (McElhinny, 2008, p. 24). By employing the concept of performativity, we become less concerned with definitions and more focused on the manifestation of power through Discourses. As McElhinny (2008) writes, “By looking at men and women’s crossover into spheres and spaces often predominantly associated with the other, we begin to get a sense of how the boundaries between those
spheres are actively maintained, how gender is policed, how people resist these boundaries, and perhaps what transformation requires” (p. 26). Schools can provide opportunities for exploration of performances of identity and critique of heteronormativity, so that queer and straight students alike not only are able to disrupt the powerful myth of normative sexuality, but also safely explore, construct, and enact identities via reading and writing assignments.

In place of the autonomous model of literacy, Street (2003) advocates for an ideological model of literacy, which recognizes literacy as a social practice influenced by culture, history, and language. Street says that literacies vary according to time and space. In any given moment, students may be engaged in multiple literacy events; however, they may not be engaged in the same events as their teachers. Street’s goal, like that of other sociocultural theorists, is to encourage educators to embrace a richer array of literacy practices, to let the outside in. Letting outside in means foregrounding both culture and context in literacy instruction. Moll (1998) advises teachers to show students how to “exploit these ample resources in their environment,” particularly what he calls “funds of knowledge” (p. 69). Teachers can connect the literacy practices of students to school literacy practices, to undergird reading, writing, and speaking events inside the classroom. Like Moll, Brandt and Clinton (2002) believe that “social context organizes literacy, rather than the other way around” (p. 340). As teachers sanction historically marginalized literacy practices and texts, the classroom becomes a “hybrid space” that fosters “shared understandings toward the realization of collective goals” (Vasudevan, 2009, p. 365). The social context of queer students becomes much more fluid, allowing for diverse performances through mediated reading and writing activities.
Some formidable barriers stand in the way of schools embracing multiple literacies. Unsanctioned literacies do not recognize the teacher as “the ultimate authority on matters of knowledge and learning” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 6). With characteristics of interactivity and fluidity, out-of-school literacies bear little resemblance to the “formally imposed/officially sanctioned sequenced curriculum which is founded on texts as information sources” (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003, p. 6). If the recently adopted Common Core standards are framed and interpreted as a neutral and universal set of skills needing to be uniformly imparted on students, then students’ experiences will be marginalized in ways that undermine their relationships with educators. In decentering both teacher as knowledge authority and curriculum as static artifact, this research study elevates the literacy practices of queer students as a means to transform curriculum, leading to safe opportunities for students to explore identities via writing assignments.

Lincoln and Guba (2003) write, “Agreements about truth may be the subject of community negotiations regarding what will be accepted as truth” (p. 271). In schools, heteronormativity, exercised in part via curriculum, can diminish the ability of marginalized students to negotiate truth. Many queer teens, like Massey and Taylor, lack opportunities to deconstruct their own or others’ gender performance, to publicly challenge how others position them, and to participate in hopeful dialogue about gender and sexuality. Friere (1993) tells us “dialogue cannot be carried on in a climate of hopelessness” (p. 92). Working sometimes at cross-purposes instead of collaboratively, both teacher-allies and queer students find themselves at the mercy of oppressive Discourses about gender and sexuality. Supportive literacy communities in schools can employ practices that foster performativity of non-normative sexualities and non-
traditional gender roles. In particular, writing assignments offer opportunities for students to organize their experiences as a means to contribute to evolving Discourses. To form supportive literacy communities, teachers and students must work together and work more democratically. A curriculum development team offers a positive and productive environment where queer students and their teachers are able to “perceive their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely as limiting – and therefore challenging” (Freire, 1993, p. 85).
Literature Review

Apple (2012) notes that curriculum is not neutral, but instead represents “someone’s knowledge, someone’s ideas about what counts as legitimate culture” (Apple, p. xiv). While Apple doesn’t feel that curriculum has historically been at the center of public Discourses, I would suggest that the creation and implementation of the Common Core is fostering national debate about how standards should be manifested in classrooms. With a glaring light shining on national standards, citizens, educators, and students have an unprecedented opportunity to share their opinions about curriculum. As the explicit curriculum (what is materialized in standards and curriculum documents) is contested, more democratic Discourses can also drag out of the shadows what is known as the implicit curriculum, or the culture of the classroom and school (Apple, 2012, p. 31). Both explicit and implicit curriculum should be examined by educators through the lens of critical perspectives and with the aid of queer students, which is the focus of this study and its research questions.

Unfortunately, as Clark (2010) points out, “By most counts, US teachers in K-12 settings are woefully ill prepared to teach LGBTQ and non-gender conforming youth and to work against heterosexism and homophobia in schools” (p. 711). Fortunately, Clark found that students in her education courses felt they were prepared to address homophobia as they began their careers in teaching because they had “multiple opportunities” to engage in critical dialogue and to practice interrupting harmful Discourses (2010, p. 709). However, even for teachers who have graduated from education programs emphasizing social justice, combating homophobic Discourses will likely be an ongoing process rather than a one-time inoculation. The idealism of early-
career teachers can fade considerably when confronted with the teaching workload, community beliefs, top down mandates, and school culture. The writing assignments produced by teachers and queer students in this study foster visibility and accessibility of non-normative gender performances in ways that the authors of other studies that I will review in this chapter recommend as being rigorous and inclusive.

The first section of this literature review examines a study that attempts to unravel some of the Discourses English language arts teachers use to explain the challenges of incorporating queer issues and identities in their classrooms. In spite of their anti-homophobic views, teachers in the study lack agency. Powerful Discourses position these teachers so that they do very little concerning queer issues and identities in their curriculum, not because they don’t believe queer students wouldn’t benefit, but because teachers feel that they can’t or don’t know how. Exploration of Discourses circulated by teachers, as part of this literature review, serves as a way to frame how members of the Curriculum Design Team (e.g., queer youth, allies, and teachers) understand the role of high school writing assignments in contributing to the construction and performance of gender and sexuality. By looking at other studies that examine Discourses about sexuality and gender in schools, we can more readily examine what distinguishes the Discourses that emerge as participants in my study collaborate to develop writing assignments that explore gender and sexuality.

While the implementation of Common Core standards provides a unique opportunity to reimagine curricula, there are longstanding impediments to school reform, such as resistance to adopting critical literacy practices, which I describe in this chapter. This literature review also describes successful efforts to incorporate marginalized
identities in K-12 coursework, specifically via reading and writing assignments designed to combat oppression among marginalized students, which serves as a benchmark by which to compare the kind of curriculum designed by students in this study. Finally, studies in the emerging field of youth voice suggest that the sensibilities, experiences, and agency of marginalized students can contribute in highly productive ways to reforming the educational system. A study of curriculum teams composed of students and educators in three countries, which I review at the end of this chapter, shows the promise of collaboration in creating curricula, especially in light of the lack of agency teachers presently feel in regard to designing curricula that includes queer identities and issues. In summary, this literature review attempts to show constraints as well as possibilities in collaboratively developing writing assignments that represent queer students in meaningful and productive ways.

The Absence of Queer Identities and Issues in the Classroom: Teacher Efficacy or Complacency?

Mediating Discourses about queer issues and identities is an important step in making literacy practices more equitable for queer students, whether teachers embark on this work among themselves or seek outside help. Thein (2013) argues that queer perspectives are seldom included in language arts courses because teachers “resist” the inclusion of queer texts and issues, in spite of holding anti-homophobic views (p. 169). Her data was generated during a week of discussion in an online master’s course. Sixteen of the 20 participants were K-12 language arts teachers. Her research questions focused on claims about teacher willingness to teach queer texts and issues, and justifications to support their claims. Her data suggested that most participants believed queer texts and
issues “could not or should not be taught in language arts classrooms” (Thein, 2013, p. 172), even though participants also portray their attitudes as anti-homophobic. The teachers in Thein’s (2013) study cited the following as reasons for not being willing or able to teach queer texts and issues in their classrooms:

1. “It’s not my job” (p. 172). Teachers in Thein’s study felt school may not be the place to address queer texts and issues, or a class other than language arts may be better suited.

2. “Others will protest” (p. 173). Teachers in the study feared reprisal from administrators, resistance from students, and disapproval by members of the community.

3. “Force of facts” (p. 174). Teachers in the study cited policies and laws, which prevented them from addressing sexuality in the classroom.

4. “It will cause more harm than good” (p. 175). Teachers in the study claimed including queer texts and issues would make gay and straight students uncomfortable and interfere with more important course concepts.

5. “It’s not fair to everyone” (p. 176). Teachers in the study felt that addressing queer texts and issues would force sexuality on an unwilling audience.

6. “I don’t know how” (p. 176). In Thein’s study teachers felt it would be a big risk to address non-normative sexuality in the classroom, especially when they expressed low efficacy.

From these teacher claims, Thein (2013) infers from her data that teachers’ beliefs are undermining inclusion of queer texts and issues in language arts classrooms:

The goal of this study was not to disparage language arts teachers or to
accuse them of homophobia or heterosexism. Instead, the goal was to shed light on discourses and rhetorical arguments that are less than productive for moving language arts pedagogy forward. While acknowledging that there are legitimate constraints in place that impede language arts teachers from including LGBT issues and texts in their classrooms, the data presented in this study demonstrate clear, problematic patterns in the discursive strategies used by the participants to argue that they cannot and/or will not teach LGBT texts and issues. (p. 177)

Thein’s (2013) course of action for teachers involves engaging in reflective or analytical work to evaluate their claims about why they cannot include queer issues and texts in their classes; reading texts that address queer issues; and, consulting professional resources that illustrate how to address queer issues in the classroom.

While Thein’s study attempts to unveil “patterned discourses” (2013, p. 177), it undervalues how Discourses gleaned from her online discussion board are situated in relation to powerful Discourses that influence teachers’ ability or willingness to address queer texts and issues in language arts classes. Many of the teachers’ statements illustrate Britzman’s (1995) assertion that we must account for “the relations between a thought and what it cannot think” (p. 151), because the teachers in Thein’s (2012) study have difficulty imagining anything but heteronormativity in their classrooms. The power of broader social and institutional Discourses includes but also extends far beyond the complacency of these individual teachers. Britzman (1995) describes “crucial cultural and historical changes that concern the constitution of bodies of knowledge and knowledge of bodies” (p. 151). Eve Sedgwick (2008) is even more hyperbolic, saying
much of Western thought has been “fractured” by a “chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition” (p. 1). For Britzman (1995), discerning the effects of power and witnessing the interplay of knowledge and ignorance is about making queer thinkable, via “methods of critiques to mark the repetitions of normalcy as a structure and as a pedagogy” (p. 153). In her discussion of the implications of her study, Thein (2012) promotes the practice of interrogating “status quo discourses” (p. 179) that are pervasive in schools, a useful step toward disrupting them. The question, then, becomes, how do teachers engage in a process of interrogating Discourses? Reflective or analytic work, pursued on one’s own, may not provide teachers with enough momentum to overcome very real hurdles to teaching queer texts and issues in their classrooms. Although well-meaning, the required multicultural course in college, according to Clark (2010), “may do little to respond to the problem” (p. 711). Teachers need ongoing support, which may come in many forms, to address Discourses that are highly problematic (in perception and in reality) in school settings.

Given the level of surveillance in terms of teacher evaluation, student test scores, and curricular standardization, it is easy to imagine why a queer-themed text would be turned down by a principal, as one of Thein’s (2012) participants discloses. Such a text is not only a transgression of Discourses about the value of a traditional education, but is viewed also as an unnecessary foray into marginalized and unintelligible identities, where heteronormative regimes have long dominated. Foucault states that there has been a proliferation of Discourses in schools about sexuality and gender, but the Discourses have been regulatory, so that sex could be rendered “morally acceptable and technically useful” (1978, p. 304). To be useful as a regulatory tool, Discourses about sexuality and
gender in schools must not only serve to support institutionalized binaries of male/female and heterosexuality/homosexuality, but must also contribute to a narrow body of knowledge measured by high-stakes tests. If this is a high bar, it is no wonder that individual teachers – without advice and encouragement from others – do not attempt to overcome it, even with the help of a university course on multicultural literature.

Participants in Thein’s (2012) study said that they felt unprepared to incorporate queer issues. They also said that incorporating queer issues and texts in their classrooms may do more harm than good. Their perception of personal efficacy and empowerment could be reasonably linked to the outcome that inclusionary approaches, when done poorly, inadvertently reinforce stereotypes about queer students. In other words, there is wisdom in steering clear of queer texts and issues if teachers are unprepared to address them. Thein’s (2012) recommendation that teachers consult instructional resources and read queer texts has the potential to expand teacher awareness, but might not necessarily produce more sensitive teaching. Britzman (1995) says teachers must both learn and unlearn; perhaps, as Thein (2012) suggests, examining dominant Discourses, among peers, is a good place to start. Unfortunately, Thein does not explain how “proliferating identifications” (Britzman, 1995, p. 158) materialize at every moment in a classroom, which many teachers view as daunting challenges rather than incredible opportunities.

Teachers who are receptive to learning from students may find a source of support in their own classrooms. Sedgwick (2008) recalls learning a lesson about identification from her students at Amherst College, where she taught a women’s studies course in 1985. As the class began a unit on lesbian issues,

I apologized that as a non-lesbian I felt somewhat at a disadvantage in
understanding this material. A trio of students turned up at my next office hour – they were on the women’s basketball team, and I remember the gangly, grave effect the three of them had approaching together – and told me, firmly but in this case kindly, that whatever I did I mustn’t do *that* again. By their account, however carefully I might have chosen my words, the meaning that came through to them as gay women was the clangorously phobic (in effect) disavowal of being one. (Sedgwick, 2008, p. xvi; italics original)

Sedgwick’s reminiscence serves as an example of how students may be in the best position to teach their teachers, if given the opportunity. These opportunities should not occur by chance, but instead should be deliberately structured as part of professional development for teachers. Teachers – even as they grapple with requirements of Common Core standards – might discover they can learn much from their students.

**Promoting a Bottom Up Approach to Curriculum Development**

What opportunities exist within the standards movement for queer identities and issues to be incorporated in curricula? Now that 45 states have adopted the Common Core standards, the question of what is in the standards has shifted to how they will be implemented. While the drafting of the standards was contentious, with various constituencies crying foul over local control (Giordona, 2013), who had input (Hesse, 2012), and the content of the influential document (Hesse, 2012), a bigger fuss is now being made over the implementation in several states. In New York, parents have lodged complaints about the high stakes tests attached to the Common Core (Alexander, 2013). The Indiana legislature has passed a bill to “pause” implementation while it considers the
ramifications of assessment and curriculum attached to the Common Core (Layton, 2013). Finally, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, Randi Weingarten, a proponent of national standards, recently stated that teachers need much more training and better curriculum before students can meet the standards (Alexander, 2013). The roll out of standards has been contested, with various constituencies finding fault with the process and trying to influence implementation. What’s starting to emerge in the national conversation about standards is how mandates are received in communities, schools, and classrooms across the country.

Resistance to the Common Core reforms may amount to much more than philosophical differences. Fullan (1982), Tye (2000), Mehta (2012), and Cuban (2013) contend that reform is also an issue of complexity. Writing about educational reform over 30 years ago, Fullan states that “the vast majority of curriculum development and other educational change ‘adoptions’ in the 1960’s and 1970’s did not get implemented in practice” (1982, p. 54). In spite of a proliferation of programs, from Teacher Corps, VISTA, Head Start, new math, and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Tye (2000) believes the results are “discouraging” (pp. 4-5). Many of these initiatives did not make a lasting impact on education, according to Tye, due to “the deep structure of schooling,” which has been largely in place since the early 20th century (2000, p. 17). Tye cites “inhibiting forces” like conventional wisdom about schooling, structural characteristics, fiscal realities, community expectations, and the nature of the teaching profession as imposing hurdles to clear on the way to lasting reform (2000, p. 3). Top down mandates might stand a better chance of success if paired with local efforts to reform schools.
For education reformers, there may be some hope for their recent efforts to overhaul the education system. Fullan (1982) insists that when reforms are more ambitious, more happens due to sheer numbers: even if a small percentage of reforms stick, a small percentage of a large number produces more change than a small percentage of a small number. In other words, No Child Left Behind (2005), Race to the Top (2009), and Common Core standards (2010) are likely to produce some changes to the educational system. However, Cuban (2013) argues that major reforms like lower class sizes and charter schools, even when packaged among other reforms, have had little impact on classroom practices, which “continued much as they had before” (p.159). To bring about change that impacts student learning, those on the receiving end – teachers, students, parents, and administrators – should have some say in how reforms are implemented.

Often the response to change among teachers comes in the form of passive resistance. According to Fullan (1982), this passivity is because change is “externally experienced” by teachers (p. 113; italics original). According to Cuban, “most educational policy makers do not actively seek teacher cooperation in designing, adopting, and implementing decisions aimed at reshaping classroom practices” (p. 162). Ultimately, what is taught in classrooms may be influenced less by educational reforms like national standards and standardized testing and more by factors like socioeconomic status, perceived best practices, student motivation, and relationships among teachers, students, parents, administrators, and community members. In a complex system, Mehta (2012) argues, change can only occur in schools when it gets at the “instructional core,” or the triangle that connects students, teachers, and content (p. 182). Cuban (2013) believes
major reforms to date have not built vital structures in which teachers collaborate to keep pace with the ever-changing, diverse needs of students and the society in which they live.

In lieu of reform efforts that are imposed on teachers, reformers might capitalize on teachers’ collective classroom experiences and local knowledge of their students and their communities to shift teaching practices. Cuban (2013) calls this “pedagogical capital” (p. 181). For example, in order to facilitate a shift in teaching history, Sawyer and Laguardia (2010) sought to shift teachers’ conceptions of curriculum through a novel professional development program, in which a group of teachers collaborated on the design of cultural narratives curricula that emphasized the study of historical perspectives and encouraged historical investigations. For teachers, reimagining history curriculum meant critiquing Discourses about history, first with their colleagues and then with students in their classes. A shift also occurred as teachers began to perceive students as producers instead of just consumers of historical understandings. Finally, a situated learning environment enabled teachers in the professional development effort to “distribute knowledge and skills among themselves” (Sawyer & Laguardia, 2010, p. 2000). The authors conclude that professional development that occurs in learning communities can alter teachers’ conceptions of curriculum and, by extension, their instructional practices.

Teachers who collaborate to produce curriculum may find policymakers will reject their efforts. According to The New York Times (Lacey, 2011), ethnic studies programs were implemented in the Tucson Unified School District as a result of the settlement of a discrimination suit in the 1970’s. More than 25 years later, the state legislature passed a measure intended to regulate ethnic studies programs. Opponents
characterized the courses as “propagandizing and brainwashing,” saying the ethnic studies programs created by teachers caused students to become “angry and resentful” and promote “racial discord” (Lacey, 2011). Proponents of the Mexican-American ethnic studies program said the courses not only address issues of justice and equity, but they also contributed to higher scores on state standardized tests. Tucson’s Mexican-American program has been a target of Arizona’s department of public instruction for violating state standards. The district has been ordered to dissolve the program or face a ten percent cut in funding. Thus, Arizona’s debate over immigration has spilled into schools, which are not neutral sites, as Freire (1987) points out. For teachers who witness community pushback or experience negative repercussions, the lesson may be to avoid controversy of any kind. But perhaps the wiser course of action for teachers has less to do with individual acts of heroism and more to do with agency that results from banding together with other teachers, community members, and students.

Students, like teachers, have also historically experienced education reforms as recipients, rather than playing an active role in deciding what happens in their schools and classrooms. Fullan (1982) asks, “What would happen if we treated the student as someone whose opinion mattered in the introduction and implementation of change in schools?” (p. 147; italics original). Because “the world of learning” now transcends schools, Mehta (2012) believes effective reforms will “empower students rather than treating them as passive subjects” (p. 199). Teachers are in the best position to not only to empower their students, but to also learn from them exactly what their needs might be. Cuban (2013) contends that in a complex system, attention must be given to the “interdependent social and intellectual relationships fashioned between teachers and
students over what content and skills are to be learned and how they are learned” (pp. 185-186). In this age of national standards and standardized tests, students and teachers could take bigger roles in the process of designing curriculum as a means to maximize engagement in learning, especially for those students who find literacy curricula in their schools permit a narrow range of performances in terms of sexuality and gender.

Critical Pedagogy: Affordances and Constraints

Because critical perspectives use power as a lens on human relations, adopting critical pedagogies may open the door to increasing teacher-student collaboration as a means to build more democratic forms of curriculum. Radical curriculum theorists begin with the proposition that there is injustice in the world, and that school is not a neutral space, is not separate from society, and is not immune to “the influences of social class, of gender, or of race” (Freire, 1987, p. 211). Creating space for performing non-normative identities as a means to speak back to power may foster among students what Friere (1993) calls “critical consciousness” (p. 73). Freire (1993) critiques what he calls the “banking model” of education, where teachers deposit information into the brains of students. “Liberating education,” Freire (1993) writes, “consists in acts of cognition, not transferal of information” (p. 79). Literacy, and more specifically school writing assignments, can mediate opportunities for students to critique as well as enact performances so as to foster “critical consciousness,” which is vital for negotiating Discourses about gender and sexuality that are at times challenging, harmful, and confusing.

According to Freire, students learn most effectively when they are in dialogue with their world and with each other (1993, p. 67). The teacher’s role is to promote
dialogue, not to indoctrinate, because indoctrination breeds “a climate of irresponsibility and license” (Freire, 1987, p. 212). Freire (1987) envisions a democratic classroom with a teacher who offers content as a means for students “to become active and critical subjects, constantly increasing their critical abilities” (p. 213). Teachers place students in dialogue with content, creating conditions for “restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry” (Freire, 1993, p. 72). Critical consciousness does not preclude content: “It is unthinkable for a teacher to be in charge of a class without providing students with material relevant to the discipline” (Freire, 1987, p. 212). However, a radical educator recognizes that content is not neutral, nor is a teacher’s skill in revealing the content. For example, choosing to allow students to study the rhetorical stance taken in an editorial about gay marriage is political, especially in light of all the other topics that could be studied for rhetorical effect. Critical pedagogy provides educators with opportunities to mediate learning experiences where students explore, examine, and perform perspectives, particularly through reading, writing, and discussion.

In crafting critical education, teachers should disrupt the binary of the tolerant and the tolerated (Britzman, 1995). Teachers should be wary of inclusionary Discourses in education, which some critical theorists label as “sentimental” and “sad necessities” (Britzman, 1995, p. 159). Inclusion historically utilizes two pedagogical approaches: providing information to students and prodding students to have a change of heart. As Britzman (1995) points out, this typically occurs as an add-on or as a special event. To avoid alienating marginalized students with superficial curricular revisions, Khan (2007) presents some steps for practitioners to take to mediate queer performances in schools and classrooms through critical pedagogy. She advises teachers to pose challenging
questions, to confront stereotypes in depth, to explore complicated scenarios with students, to differentiate between individual bias and structural discrimination, and to offer various sources of information for students to evaluate. These critical approaches may foster sustainable and critical perspectives rather than short-lived, “sentimental” inclusion activities. Instead, critical pedagogy is implemented when students “are asked to question common sense or widely accepted assumptions” (Nieto & Bode, 2012, p. 125). Educators might choose to employ critical pedagogy as a means for students to place common-sense Discourses under scrutiny. For teachers, this means giving consideration to voice, culture, power, and ideology (Sleeter & Bernal, 2003) as they design literacy activities. Giving students a voice via “critical engagement with ideas through dialogue” is essential to addressing “Otherness” (Sleeter & Bernal, 2003, p. 242). Culture can be investigated through identity and community, so students gain insights about how popular culture, for example, constructs identity and impacts communities (Sleeter & Bernal, 2003, p. 242). Through the deployment of critical pedagogy, students can be taught to utilize a set of critical tools as they engage with classmates and the community at-large in dialogue about performances that contribute to “Otherness” and normalization. Writing assignments, if re-envisioned as tools to promote critical perspectives, can enable students to critique power in performances, as well as assert power in their own written performances.

**Writing as a Key Component of Critical Literacy**

The writing assignments that students produce in schools typically allow for neither exploration of unsanctioned identities nor application of critical stances to texts that promote heteronormativity. Writing teachers historically have given a cold shoulder
to any student writing that veers from a mechanical, detached tone. Fairclough (1995) describes two studies, for example, that examine “issues of objectivity and impersonalness in academic writing” (p. 228). For the students who were subjects of the studies, inserting “I” into academic papers enabled them to project identities while still exploring important themes and ideas in their courses. Students found their voice as they explored new ideas, and instructors did not perceive a drop off in understanding course concepts as a result of using a first person perspective in academic writing. Teaching and learning, according to Fairclough (2010), “is oriented to a significant degree toward the use and inculcation of particular discursive practices” that frame “social relationships and identities” (p. 532). Requiring students to remove the pronoun “I” from a piece of academic writing may appear to many teachers to be a sensible writing convention, but it also serves as a means to regulate Discourses, particularly in relation to issues of race, culture, gender, and sexuality. Literacy practices are inextricably linked to the ways identities are affirmed, erased, constructed, and mediated.

When they ignore the “personal literacies” (Kirkland, 2009, p. 390) of their students, educators risk alienating youth from a variety of other literacies that might only be encountered in school settings. In his ethnographic study of a young black man named Derrick, Kirkland (2009) claims the tattoos on Derrick’s body represent a “literate act” (p. 376). The bodies of black men, according to Kirkland (2009), are “contested spaces” that “act as sites of struggle and storytelling” (p. 378). For young black men, stories that are stigmatized in school may find performative outlets in tattoos, as well as tags, graffiti, and raps. Derrick uses tattoos to cope with, connect to, and comment on events in his life. As personal as Derrick’s tattoos are, they extend far beyond his “individual imagination”
(p. 388) to include the tattoo artist, the subjects to whom his tattoos are dedicated, and anyone who witnesses or might witness his tattoos. Kirkland advises English teachers to reconceive literacies as both personal and off-the-page, if they truly wish to create spaces for young black males (or transgender youth, as another example) to enact literate performances in schools. Kirkland models an ethnographic stance that literacy teachers might consider adopting as they attempt to understand literacies beyond the narrow, pedagogic scope found in literacy classrooms.

When the identities of queer youth are marginalized in schools, students sometimes turn to non-school organizations to help them enact and explore non-normative identities. Blackburn (2010) describes an out-of-school space – a youth center called the Attic – that welcomed queer youth to find allies, comfort in a community that included peers and empathetic adults, and much-needed services. The Attic housed informative and queer-friendly texts, such as event fliers and queer newspapers. Blackburn also describes the Attic as a space that facilitated literature discussions, which more broadly included movies and TV shows. She describes how a variety of literacy practices are bound up in the ways queer youth find themselves in a state of “becoming and being” (p. 61). Finally, she acknowledges that school spaces as not necessarily void of opportunities to read and write about queer issues and identities; simultaneously, she portrays the Attic as an imperfect space, not necessarily devoid of sexism, racism, or homophobia. Blackburn’s study frames literacy as not obeying in-school and out-of-school boundaries, expressing her desire to equip students, through Story Time and Women’s Group, to skillfully and confidently push queer issues and identities into school spaces, especially literacy classrooms. Some student participants even joined the
Speaker’s Bureau so they could educate service providers about queer issues and identities; two of these young speakers told a group of teachers how writing gave them “a way of articulating their thoughts and feelings about being gay and lesbian in worlds that they experienced as homophobic” (Blackburn, 2010, p. 55). At the same time youth were developing agency as a result of their involvement with Attic programs, Blackburn worked with a group of teacher allies, called the Pink TIGers (teacher inquiry group), to examine curricular Discourses and to devise literacy practices that combat homophobia in schools. Blackburn’s important study points to ways teachers and students can engage in dialogue through and around literacy practices, transforming how participants mediate Discourses and perform identities as readers, writers, and allies.

When educators mediate literacy learning activities for students that illustrate how people coordinate and are coordinated by Discourses (Gee, 2010, p. 36), then students will begin to demonstrate agency as they navigate and generate Discourses that position them in the world. To accomplish this task, educators must become more familiar with the Discourses that influence what they teach (the curriculum), as well as explore Discourses their students might be ready and able to discern and even alter through ongoing, persistent critique. Holland et al. (1998) indicate that identities, while vastly shaped by “past experiences” of subjective positioning, can be improvised – “using cultural resources available” (p. 18) – such as literacy practices in schools. Past experiences that students draw upon for their writing need not be negative; in fact, writing assignments in literacy classrooms can be designed so that performances of identities constitute positive experiences that contribute to healthy conceptions of non-normative identities by queer and straight students alike. Reconstituting writing
assignments may hinge on how writing assignments are constituted, a topic I will address in the next two sections.

**Student-Faculty Curriculum Teams**

Cruz (2012) wonders, “When do we create space in the public schools for students to critique these larger narratives of labor, masculinity, and compulsory heterosexuality?” (p. 464). For Cruz, curriculum is power, and her work in a Los Angeles community attempts to shift that power to students and their families. Cruz’s work elevates community-based curriculum, so that student experiences are part of and not alienated from learning in school. Cruz (2012) describes working with 32 high school students at two schools, who actively participated in the design of their education:

Students interned in paid local community-based organizations in their neighborhoods, such as the Red Cross, local libraries and archives, legal aid services, health clinics, and immigration service centers, for approximately 8 to 12 hours a week. Working closely with teachers, curriculum coordinators would research and develop learning activities and help students create curricula based on the experiences and observations of students at their community sites. A record of daily events and curriculum goals and objectives was collected in teaching journals to help assess whether an activity or learning environment or pedagogy worked effectively with students. (pp. 465-466)

Interdependence is vital in developing agency among students, teachers, community members, and researcher interact in designing and implementing meaningful learning experiences.
Some work has also been done in the last decade to involve college students in the process of determining what their education looks like. Most notable is a study by Bovill, Cook-Sather, and Felten (2011), which looked at collaborative pedagogical design at four colleges, two in the United States and two in the United Kingdom. While the pedagogical innovations at the four sites varied, the authors developed one theoretical framework and one set of findings, which they published in an article entitled, “Students as co-creators of teaching approaches, course design, and curricula: implications for academic developers” (Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten, 2011). The authors ground their studies in perspectives about student engagement and student voice, asserting that the involvement of students in curriculum development fosters active learning, a sense of agency, and meaningful contributions to their learning community, which can lead to higher levels of student achievement. At Bryn Mawr College in the United States, college students served as consultants to faculty members, collaboratively planning teaching approaches and then evaluating the results with faculty members after class sessions. When new courses were offered or existing courses redesigned at Elon University in the United States, teams of one or two faculty members and two to six students were formed to develop course syllabi, under the guidance of an academic developer. The team first created goals for the course, and then, using backward design, crafted the assessments and instructional practices that supported the course goals. And when program coordinators at University College in Ireland wanted to redesign first-year geography curriculum, they hired third-year students to design a new virtual learning environment based around case studies covering important themes for first-year geography, such as migration and
the coffee trade. They then produced written, audio and video resources for the virtual learning environment that first-year students could interact with and use to support their learning. (2011, p. 137)

Finally, when environmental activists wanted to sharpen their organizing and lobbying capabilities, academic staff at Queen Margaret University in Scotland designed course modules, which were “dependent on what students needed to learn to become more informed active citizens” (Bovill, Cook-Sather & Felten, 2011, p. 137). Curriculum decisions were negotiated among students enrolled in the course and academic staff, so as to fully address the needs of the students.

Bovill et al. (2011) noted that the performances of teachers and students were challenged, as was the idea of who was responsible for teaching and learning in a college classroom. The authors noted that with greater power, students also assumed greater responsibility. For faculty, the reasons behind teaching methods and course content were clarified. There were challenges to sharing pedagogical responsibilities with students, including faculty willingness to give up control, student reticence about transforming traditional faculty-student relationships, and setting aside time for planning. The authors recommend taking small steps at first; fostering the creation of liminal spaces so that students feel that they are being taken seriously; valuing not just products but also processes; and, recognizing that a shift in power dynamics and traditional roles is not a finite process, but one that requires continual reinvention. This study informed the critical and democratic processes that I attempted to employ as the basis of the methodology.

**Emphasizing Agency Over Victimization: Queer Students Speak to Power**

Performing in a way that is more “natural” for queer youth often occurs in spaces
outside of schools. Space, according to Blackburn (2012), is “a dialogic between place and people” (p. 10). An example of a space that fosters collaboration among queer youth and their heterosexual peers is Gay-Straight Alliance, or G.S.A. (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam & Laub, 2009, p. 891). There are thousands of G.S.A.’s across the United States, working to create safe spaces in schools for queer youth. A study by Russell et al. (2009) shows how students who participate in G.S.A.’s develop a personal feeling of empowerment: they feel efficacious, they feel they have a voice, and they feel like they can act on their own behalf. Furthermore, Russell et al. find that empowered youth often are in the position of “leading adults rather than partnering with them” (2009, p. 903) to enact reform in schools, which is not surprising given the role of teachers in upholding school norms. This image of youth leading adults is far-removed from closeted or queer-acting students who are victimized, harassed, and isolated.

Queer students often take matters of discrimination into their own hands. On the Youth Resource website, Braden writes that after he was bullied, “I made it my goal to ‘change’ the school. I managed to get the courage to go back into the school and meet with the administration. Because of that, I have founded a diversity group, and I have also set many goals for the school to achieve” (Braden’s Story, n.d., para. 6). On the same website, Ben explains that he started a Gay-Straight Alliance “to bring people together in my school” (Ben’s Story, n.d., para. 6). In the report Queer Youth Advice for Educators (2011), Eddie tells how he created a public service announcement, which his school broadcast to its entire student body. Meanwhile, Rebecca shares how she worked to educate the teachers in her high school: “My psychology teacher’s class… I’m the third [lesbian student], and we’ve opened his eyes. Now he’s this amazing person. Before he
was ignorant. Now he’s incredible” (Nieto & Bode, 2011, p. 206). Queer students also confronted instances of bias and bullying when they saw it. In *Queer Youth Advice for Educators* (2011), Deshaun says, “I have to stand up for my people when people start calling them out. And when the teacher says nothing, I’m like, ‘Miss? What? Are you ignoring this mess? Someone is being stepped on here for who they are and that is not right’ ” (Young, p. 8). At another school, James tells how he called a class meeting to address the taunting of a classmate (Young, 2011). Even as queer students are constructed, erased, or bullied by Discourses in schools, many students vigorously contest Discourses they object to, especially when they find agency in teaming with allies.

While G.S.A.’s often influence school culture in positive ways, they tend to operate on the periphery of schools, as one of many extracurricular activities serving a limited number of interested students. For queer youth who attend schools with no G.S.A. or who are in the closet at school, non-normative identities can only be enacted without policing in spaces that are located in out-of-school contexts. As a result, some queer students circumvent their schools as a means to empowerment. Benny, a queer student in a small town, writes, “The Internet became my outlet to the rest of the world. I could talk to others like me, speak freely about everything and nothing. I found support, and answers to questions I'd been carrying around a long time” (Benny’s Story, n.d., para. 3). The support he received outside of school gave Benny the courage to come out at school. Likewise, a Brigham Young University student who posted an It Gets Better video described herself as a “Mormon lesbian,” stating she was suicidal as a result of “feeling rejected” by peers, family, and church. “And then one day,” she tells viewers, “I just went online and I went to message boards and blogs and on Twitter and just tried to find all my
resources out there. And I was really surprised to realize that I wasn’t alone. And I just found a lot of people that were supportive and willing to listen” (Brigham Young University USGA, 2012). Her empowerment via online resources led her to a campus group for queer students, and then to record the It Gets Better video with other BYU students, in spite of facing sanctions. These queer students are examples of what Rodriquez and Brown (2009) call “agents of change” (p. 22). They possess resiliency, which enables them to “adapt to adversity, loss, or conflict” (Larson, 2011, p. 329). Too often young people are viewed as vessels for knowledge and victims in need of empowerment. Many queer youth, especially those involved in organizations like Gay-Straight Alliance, possess both agency and knowledge that they use to help themselves as well as others, including teachers.

The literature reviewed in this section illustrates possible critical literacy practices teachers might employ, but also describes Discourses that teachers articulate as to why they won’t or can’t incorporate queer themes into literacy curriculum. Teachers must understand how Discourses position them in terms of what and how they can teach; in addition, teachers must learn how to employ critical literacy approaches on behalf of their queer students. In the same way critical theorists abhor the information dump as a teaching practice, so should critical theorists move past an information dump in working with teachers to mediate Discourses about queer youth. Efforts by a few heroic teachers will not be enough to handle heteronormative school spaces and narrow conceptions of curriculum; instead, this study suggests that educators need to band together with other recipients of mandated curriculum – that is, their students – to enact literacy practices in schools that allow for exploration of queer issues and identities.
Methodology of Study: Fostering Critical and Democratic Practices

My methodological decisions were informed by my research questions, conceptual framework, and ethical commitments. One ethical goal I set for the study was to foster conditions for social justice and democratic practices at the same time as the Curriculum Design Team studied conditions of injustice and oppression. As a result, I partnered with youth in generating and analyzing data in the same way I encouraged educators to partner with youth to construct writing assignments. This study was also designed to fulfill the practical goal (Maxwell, 2005, p. 21) of reconfiguring the ways in which writing assignments are produced, as well as the intellectual goal (Maxwell, 2005, p. 21) of understanding what happens when students and teachers collaborate to produce writing assignments. From its inception, this study aimed to understand both processes and outcomes of collaborative curriculum design, which were influenced profoundly by the methodology I chose to employ, because what we find out is directly linked to how we find it out (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, p. 11; emphasis mine).

The practical and intellectual goals of my study, as well as goals for collaborating with participants to generate and analyze data, align with what Fine (2007) describes as “critical participatory projects” (p. 216). My study proceeded from the idea that schools are sites of injustice and that queer students possess marginalized but meaningful perspectives about oppression in regard to sexuality. My study also proceeded from the idea that, as a researcher, I have an obligation to do more than report what I see and hear: I must try to change conditions that lead to oppression. Believing that my efforts would be most effective when linked to the efforts of others, I placed student voices at the heart of this study’s methodology. Maxwell (2005) states that qualitative research thrives as a
result of making meaning with participants in a particular context (p. 24). My efforts to collaborate with youth were informed by *student voice research*, which emanates from an epistemological stance that “expertise and knowledge are widely distributed” (Fine, 2007, p. 215). In this chapter I describe how students and teachers worked side-by-side to critique and generate curriculum. This methodology necessitated spending time working with youth to help them understand their critical participatory roles in this study as well as to help them learn some basics about curriculum, which I also describe in this chapter.

Given the involvement of participants in generating and analyzing data, I describe the role of Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough, 2010) in preparing students to critique writing assignments. Critical Language Awareness (CLA) develops “the capacities of people for language critique, including their capacities for reflexive analysis of the educational process itself” (Fairclough, 2010). For example, from the outset I framed this study as an opportunity for students and teachers to investigate the role of writing assignments in promoting heteronormativity. I also developed and implemented activities for student participants that drew on CLA, prior to their work with teachers, as a means to prepare students to identify and disrupt heteronormative curricular Discourses. In this chapter, I tie these moves to my efforts to achieve plausibility for this study’s findings. Finally, in examining my role as a researcher in a critical participatory research project, I describe my individual experiences with issues surrounding sexuality and schools, the influence I might have had on the school site, and the nature of my relationships with participants.

**Study Design: Student Voice Research**

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Friere writes, “Knowledge emerges only
through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful
inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72).
This study was inspired by Freire’s vision of jointly constructed knowledge, specifically
as it pertains to inquiry pursued collaboratively by adults and students. Data collection
and analysis methods for this study were informed by student voice research, which
acknowledges the unique, local insights students possess about their educational
institutions (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009, p. 22). A key precept of student voice research is
uncovering the origins, dynamics, and effects of power, not only in terms of imbalance
among educators and students in school settings, but also in regard to “the wider context
of social inequality” (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009, p. 22). Because we created an
environment that respects the voices of youth, two teachers and a researcher became
attuned to the ways students in this study perceived how power flows through and is
amplified by writing assignments.

Student voice research is connected to a larger movement called positive youth
development, which has as its goal the development of citizens who are “personally
responsible, participatory, and justice oriented” (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 238).
The movement is a reaction against the demonization, criminalization, and
dehumanization of youth (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009, p. 20). Student voice research
considers youth testimony as a valuable data source for research on youth issues. After
information is gathered and interpreted, it may be used to inform projects, programs, and
institutions whose goal is positive youth development. Positive youth development
fosters empowerment of youth by positioning youth as “knowledge generators and
experts” (Kirshner, 2010, p. 239) who can inform as well as disrupt powerful Discourses
via their research into vital issues. Youth participants employ “critical perspectives on inequality and oppression,” with an eye toward denaturalizing their own circumstances, such as homophobia, racism, poverty, or other forms of oppression (Kirshner, 2010, p. 239). The goal of student voice research not only is to inform organizations about their practices, but also to empower the individuals who are involved in the research process.

Empowerment and transformation in student voice research is achieved through cultivation of “critical consciousness,” a concept developed by Freire (1970) as he combated illiteracy in Brazil in the 1960’s (p. 73). Generating knowledge – what Freire (1970) would call “the act of cognition” (p. 83) – occurs when students employ a critical stance, which stands in sharp contrast to the one-way flow of knowledge from teacher to student (p. 72). Students “exercise influence over the production of official scholarly knowledge” (Rodriguez & Brown, p. 23) when they partner with adults, rather than merely giving their opinions about a program or organization (Sabo-Flores, 2007).

According to Sabo-Flores (2007), youth can develop confidence, social skills, and civic awareness while exploring their identities and acquiring social capital. Researchers note that adults also benefit from student voice research. Zeldin (2004) found that adults who collaborated with youth in program evaluation felt better about the decisions they were making on behalf of youth because they better understood the concerns of youth (in Sabo-Flores, 2007, p. 12). Student voice research was central to the both the design and goals of this research study.

**Setting**

This study occurred in the spring of 2014 in a large, suburban high school in the Rocky Mountain region. Participating students suggested that I call their school
“Coolidge High School,” because many schools are named after U.S. presidents, but few would have chosen Coolidge as a moniker. With about 2000 students, Coolidge prided itself on its rigorous academic programs. The school offered both Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate courses. In addition to its academic emphasis, Coolidge’s arts and athletics programs have been perennially successful. The school had over 100 teaching faculty, most of whom possessed a master’s degree. In many ways, from the sprawling campus to the number of teachers with advanced degrees, Coolidge resembled a small college.

Coolidge was much less ethnically and socioeconomically diverse than other schools in its district or across the state. In the spring of 2014, the district website revealed that 77% of the students at Coolidge were white, 10% Asian, 7% Hispanic, and 0.6% African American. Poverty was not widespread at Coolidge, with about 7% of the students receiving free or reduced lunch during the 2013-2014 school year. About 6% of the students qualified for special education services, while only 2.5% were designated as English Language Learners. The district’s Website contained no information about students who are mixed race or who identify as LGBT. While its lack of socioeconomic and ethnic diversity made the school less than ideal for a study, its openness to curricular innovation and empowerment of queer students made Coolidge a promising site for conducting research about queer issues and identities in the curriculum.

The principal of Coolidge, Mr. Smith, had been on the job for nine years. (All names in this study are pseudonyms.) Prior to serving at Coolidge, Mr. Smith was the principal at a large, suburban school in another school district, where I was an English teacher. I had known Mr. Smith for 12 years. In 2012, we crossed paths again at a
statewide LGBT education conference, where I learned about his school’s inclusivity of queer students. For example, the school administration had proactively addressed the issue of bathrooms for its transgender students. Same-sex couples at prom were viewed as unremarkable, and transgender students were honored in various ways, not shunned or ridiculed. Coming-out announcements, according to staff members and students, were typically met with kindness or indifference. By all appearances, Coolidge was an inclusive place.

Its reputation for inclusivity, versus a reputation for homophobia, was one of the chief reasons I opted to conduct my research study at Coolidge. In any school, a researcher has to first convince the gatekeepers (the principal and district officials) that the study would be a contribution and not a distraction to the school. In many cases, studies that focus on queer issues and identities in schools might not get past the principal or district administrators. Most studies of queer students occur at the periphery of schools, such as a study of teacher attitudes in a teacher education class (Thein, 2014), or a survey of G.S.A.’s (Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam & Laub, 2009), or interviews with queer students in afterschool settings (Blackburn, 2012). Next, a researcher has to convince participants at the school to join the study. In schools that are not perceived as safe spaces, few queer students might be willing to step out, fearing harassment. Teachers would not likely step up, either, given the repercussions they might face. The trust I had already established with the principal and some of the staff members at Coolidge, in combination with the school’s reputation for inclusivity, provided a level of access I did not think I could gain at most schools. My decision to hold the study at Coolidge was partly validated by the speedy approval I received from the school district, just two days from
the time I sent my proposal to the district headquarters until I received an email from
them giving me permission to conduct the study.

Although students in the study reported they felt Coolidge was a safe space, not all students shared in this perception, and while some staff members may have
progressively addressed queer issues, not all may have felt that they were equipped to do
so. Prior to the study, a colleague of mine from a professional organization who works as
a language arts teacher at Coolidge told me that a queer student in her class asked her for
queer-themed texts as a way to explore his identity. Instead of teachers providing these
texts during class, the student had to elicit titles from a trusted teacher. My colleague also
said that another student had been writing a blog about queer-themed texts for a local
bookstore, developing as a writer and as a queer young adult in an out-of-school space.
And finally, a visit to one of the school’s restrooms revealed the same stale graffiti I have
witnessed for over 40 years: Slayer; Metallica; Sketches of sex acts; Witty stuff like,
“Bucket list: To pee off a cliff and finish peeing before my piss hits the ground 64 feet
below;” and, as usual, the ubiquitous “faggot” with an arrow pointing to someone else’s
comment. For many reasons, Coolidge High School met the requirements for this study:
welcoming to a researcher interested in queer issues, relatively safe for queer students to
participate in a research study, and staffed by teachers who were empathetic to queer
students but may not have found ways to make their curriculum more inclusive of non-
normative identities. The school was not perfectly inclusive – no school is – but its staff
was willing to let me through the door.

Participants

For the purposes of this study, two teachers and seven students formed a
Curriculum Design Team during the spring of 2014. The following section describes how participants were recruited for the study, as well as challenges in recruiting a representative sample of teachers and students.

**Students.** The students were recruited through the school’s Gay-Straight Alliance and through recommendations from staff members. To learn more about students who might be interested in participating as well as to publicize the study, I created a flier that explained the intent, provided some background, and detailed the requirements of the study. The flier described who might make a suitable candidate for the study: students could be in any grade (9-12), as long as they regularly attended classes at Coolidge and not elsewhere. The flier said students must be able share their own perspectives on reading and writing assignments in their classes as they worked alongside teachers in a cooperative enterprise. In bold, I emphasized that “this study is open to LGBTQ students and allies” as a means to ensure that allies could participate, and so that anyone who did not want to identify as LGBTQ could participate in the guise of an ally.

On the backside of the flier, I created an application form that asked for the following information:

- Name
- Grade level
- One teacher who would be able to recommend you for this study
- What extracurricular activities have you participated in?
- Would you be able to attend meetings after school in March and April?
- What is your interest in this study?
- Have you explained your interest in participating in this study to a parent
or guardian? How do they feel about your participation?

Fliers were distributed to students who might have been interested in the study via faculty members and a G.S.A. meeting. Ultimately, the G.S.A. meeting turned out to be the most effective platform to recruit students, since every student who participated in the study was also a member of the G.S.A. Of the eight applications that were returned to me, only one student outside of the G.S.A. applied to participate, and they never returned a consent form to me.

At the invitation of G.S.A. leaders and advisor, I attended a G.S.A. meeting on February 19, 2014. Sitting at a student desk, part of a misshapen circle, I had the opportunity to introduce myself to students. I talked about my work as a PhD student and as a researcher. I spoke about my history as a closeted student and closeted teacher. I also shared that this was my first G.S.A. meeting ever. I talked about why I thought students could make valuable contributions to curriculum, and also why I was focusing on writing instead of reading. I said that writing prompts are not necessarily neutral, even though they’re framed that way. I finished by describing the study, saying that it was open to all students. I intended this to be a diplomatic way to involve anyone who wasn’t out at school or at home; I didn’t anticipate their negative reaction to opening the study to anyone.

Sabo-Flores (2007) advises facilitators of YPAR studies to involve students in developing additional criteria for the selection of participants, so after describing my study, I asked G.S.A. members what qualifications they thought participants should possess. They felt participants must be involved in LGBTQ activities, must demonstrate sincerity and really want to help, must know the issues and be well-read, and, if they did
not identify as LGBTQ, must be a special ally. A few students insisted that all of the school-age participants should identify as LGBTQ, because they best understood the challenges they faced in the classroom. These students worried that the study would be populated by “good kids” who only wanted to pad their résumés. Therefore, the selection process I proposed – and which they approved – involved teachers helping to make the final decision. I told students at the G.S.A. meeting that identifying as straight would not automatically disqualify anyone, because the perspective of allies would be important, too. I explained that, if more than six qualified students applied, participants would be selected based on an application and teacher recommendation. In addition, my goal was to select students who brought diversity to the Curriculum Design Team.

In the end, seven students applied; I quickly decided against turning any of them away from participating in the study, since each one met the requirements we established at the G.S.A. meeting. The students who were selected did not constitute a diverse group in terms of sex, race, and probably not socioeconomic status, either, given the demographics of the school. All of the students appeared to be White, expressing their gender identity with the preferred pronouns of she/her/hers. They represented grades 10, 11, and 12. Most of the diversity was reflected in their sexual orientation, information that was volunteered by each student. Three students identified as lesbian, one student identified as bisexual, one student identified as straight, one student identified as demisexual (sexual attraction depends on forming an emotional bond with someone), and one student identified as both queer and questioning (in a state of questioning both sexuality and gender). Table 1 provides an at-a-glance profile of the student participants; names are pseudonyms selected by the students at the first Curriculum Design Team
meeting. Each student signed a consent form, which also was signed by a parent or guardian. (See Appendix A for “Parent Permission and Student Consent Form.”)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Preferred Pronouns</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>she/her/hers</td>
<td>lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>she/her/hers</td>
<td>lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>she/her/hers</td>
<td>straight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>she/her/hers</td>
<td>bisexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>she/her/hers</td>
<td>lesbian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>she/her/hers</td>
<td>demisexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrix</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>she/her/hers</td>
<td>queer &amp; questioning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In selecting Coolidge as the site for my study, I was aware that attaining a diverse sample of students in terms of race and socioeconomic status would be difficult. The sample of students who participated in this study is clearly atypical in terms of the overall population of queer students in the United States: even beyond race and socioeconomic status, the most glaring deficit in the sample is the absence of young men. As I scanned the members of the G.S.A. in February 2014, it became apparent that recruiting young men for the study could be a problem, given the scarcity of men at the meeting. The one young man who expressed a lot of interest in participating in the study could not coordinate our meeting schedule with athletics. While the sample definitely spoke to the lack of diversity at Coolidge, the absence of men and non-White participants may also indicate the smaller measure of acceptance some young people were granted, based on their sex or culture. Attempting to gather a more representative group from a more
representative school might have been unworkable from the very beginning. That said, no matter the sample, it is possible that the findings of this kind of study may inform other studies and may also extend to other situations in which teachers struggle to adapt their curriculum to meet the needs of queer students.

**Teachers.** At the outset of this study I sought three teachers to participate. Each teacher who participated on the Curriculum Design Team had to work full-time at the school and teach courses where writing was a vital component of the curriculum. Teachers did not need to be already proficient in queering their curriculum; in fact, teachers who only possessed empathy or interest were the best candidates for the study, given that they would be more representative of teachers across the country who experience dissonance as a result of the diversity of their classrooms and the limitations of their curriculum. Ideally, I wanted teachers who were interested in participating in the study to express a desire to adjust their instruction to meet the needs of queer students, while conveying that they did not know how or did not feel like they were able.

On February 14, 2014, at the principal’s invitation, I spoke to the entire faculty about my study, in an effort to recruit teachers but also to enlist their support in recruiting students to participate. Students had a noncontact day, a Friday rolled into the Presidents Day weekend, so teachers had meetings and work time. Mr. Smith created a rotation of four 50-minute sessions, so I spoke about my study to a quarter of the staff at a time, which was fine by me, because I find speaking to an entire high school faculty to be very challenging. We met in a classroom with a view of the mountains, equipped with sophisticated solar lights to provide a warm ambience for students studying Spanish. A sign on the wall said (in Spanish), “All races and all faiths have the same dreams and the
same needs. Treat others the way you want to be treated.” The poster had a rainbow
design with human figures holding hands.

Mr. Smith opened the meeting with a video of a Dallas sportscaster talking about
Michael Sam, an openly gay college football player who was on the verge of being
drafted by the NFL. The point of the video was to show that the NFL and society at-large
tolerates criminal behavior and yet rejects an openly gay man in the NFL. Mr. Smith
described how far society still has to go, even as great strides were being made at
Coolidge. The video served as a means to introduce my work in the school. I thanked Mr.
Smith and praised the staff for the many examples of inclusiveness at Coolidge. I said
that many schools were not in the same place, and that LGBTQ students often found
themselves harassed. And in many schools, LGBTQ students did not see themselves
represented in the curriculum. I described the purpose of the study, outlined requirements
for participating, and then answered questions from the staff. Most questions were
logistical, like, “How can students reach you if they are interested in the study?” But two
questions signaled some unease over the nature of the study. One teacher asked, “How do
you manage these difficult topics so they don’t blow up, especially in terms of being
sexually explicit?” and another teacher wondered, “Would the school board have to
approve the curriculum we design?” Clearly, some of the teachers were sensitive to larger
societal Discourses about sexuality in schools.

Ultimately, after reaching out via email to several teachers who were
recommended by the G.S.A. members, Mr. Smith, and my colleague in the professional
organization, two teachers signed and returned consent forms. (See Appendix A for
“Teacher Consent Form.”) Mr. Jones, a straight, white, cisgender man in his mid-thirties,
taught social studies and also an elective diversity class. Ms. Wright, a straight, white, cisgender woman in her late 20’s, taught English classes. Both came highly recommended by G.S.A. students; in fact, the students lobbied for certain teachers to participate. In the preliminary interview, Ms. Wright described how student lobbying overcame her concerns about participating:

I actually was interested in it when you came and spoke at that professional development day. And I thought, ‘Oh, that sounds really cool and interesting.’ The reason I was actually reserved was because of, ‘I don’t know how much time I have.’ But then I had three students come up to me and said, ‘Hey, we really think you’d be great for this. Would you be interested? Would you be willing to do it?’ And that to me was like kind of pushing me over where I thought, ‘Yeah, I really need to do that.’ It meant a lot to me that they personally came to me and said, ‘We thought of you. We thought this would be good.’ So that was kind of the tipping point for me. (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview)

Mr. Jones cited an ongoing personal and professional desire to learn more so that he could address topics of race, gender, and sexuality in his classes “without sounding like a complete idiot” (Mr. Jones, Preliminary Interview). Social justice was foregrounded in the work Mr. Jones did as a teacher. Again, in no way did these two teachers constitute a representative sample. But with the study scheduled to begin, these two teachers signaled a willingness to learn alongside students while sharing some insecurities about the inclusiveness of their instruction. As a result of participating in the study, teachers may have chosen to implement writing activities they produced in collaboration with students, although that was not the focus of this study. Throughout the
duration of this study in the spring of 2014, two teachers and seven students from Coolidge High School formed a Curriculum Design Team.

**Data Collection**

The task facing researchers today, according to Lather, is “to produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (2006, p. 52). Collaborating on a critique of curriculum, as well as the development of lessons and units, constitutes a meaningful and effective way of producing knowledge. During this study, I employed the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overview of interviews and meetings</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preliminary Interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Meeting #1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Meeting #2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDT#1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviewing (Anderson-Levitt, 2006) to gather information about the setting, participants, and activities. Guided by grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I was “ready to be surprised” by my findings rather testing my “preconceived ideas” on my study’s participants (Bryant, 2014, p. 126). In conjunction with students and teachers, I collected data at Coolidge High School as a means to discover “what meanings different actors are making of a situation” (Anderson-Levitt, 2006, p. 282). Fieldwork required some fly-on-the-wall observation, especially at the beginning of the study, when I attended two meetings at Coolidge. However, my primary sources of data were interviews and meetings that I facilitated as a participant researcher. Interviews occurred at the outset and conclusion of the study, what I refer to as “Preliminary Interview” and “Exit Interview” throughout the remaining chapters. I also facilitated five meetings at Coolidge, the first two with student participants only, and the final three with both teacher and student participants, which I have labeled *Curriculum Design Team* (CDT) meetings. In Table 2 (above), I provide an overview of primary data gathering activities. In Table 3 (below), I show alignment among data
gathering activities and my research questions. Before, during, and after the Curriculum Design Team met to critique and construct curriculum, I was actively collecting data.

Data collection consisted of observations, interviews, and artifacts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Methods of Data Collection</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How do members of the curriculum design team (e.g., queer youth, allies, and teachers) understand the role of high school writing prompts in contributing to the construction and performance of gender and sexuality? | • preliminary interviews with teachers (February 24-25, 2014)  
• preliminary interviews with students (February 27-28, 2014)  
• audiorecordings (supplemented by field notes) of 2 meetings with participating students: discourse analysis and preparation to meet with teachers (first 2 weeks in March; 90 minutes per meeting)  
• audiorecordings of 3 CDT meetings (supplemented by field notes) of teachers and students (April 8, 15, 22; 90 minutes per meeting)  
• various artifacts produced during meetings, including draft LA and SS writing assignment plans |
| What Discourses and identities emerge as participants develop writing assignments that explore gender and sexuality? | • audiorecordings of 3 CDT meetings (supplemented by field notes) of teachers and students (April 8, 15, 22; 90 minutes per meeting)  
• audiorecordings (supplemented by field notes) of 2 meetings with participating students: discourse analysis and preparation to meet with teachers (first 2 weeks in March; 90 minutes per meeting)  
• various artifacts produced during meetings, including draft ELA and social studies unit plans |
| In what ways do curricular artifacts produced by teachers and queer students foster visibility and accessibility of non-normative gender performances via writing assignments? | • audiorecordings of 3 CDT meetings (supplemented by field notes) of teachers and students (April 8, 15, 22; 90 minutes per meeting)  
• various artifacts produced during meetings, including draft LA and SS writing assignment plans  
• post-study interviews with teachers and students (April 28-30) |

**Informal observations.** I began the study in February 2014 with informal observations of teachers and students in two specific school settings. At the invitation of the principal, I attended one faculty meeting in February 2014 as a means to meet
teachers, talk about my study, and gain a sense of staff practices and beliefs. At the invitation of the Gay-Straight Alliance (G.S.A.), I attended one G.S.A. meeting in February 2014 to meet students, talk about my study, and gain a sense of student perceptions. After my observations, I wrote field notes, which Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw describe as “active processes of interpretation and sense-making” (1995, p. 8). The observations at the beginning of the study helped me write and revise my research questions and my interview questions; in addition, the observations helped to inform my facilitation of meetings with teachers and students. Because I was both participant and observer in the meetings I attended, observations provided opportunities for participants (and other staff and students) to become acquainted with me. Finally, observations in the beginning of the study proved to be fruitful in recruiting participants for the study as well as framing the work we were going to do together.

**Interviews.** I conducted preliminary and exit interviews with participating teachers and students. (I was unable to obtain exit interviews from Kate and Beatrix.) Like the observations at the beginning of the study, the interviews provided an opportunity for me to get to know the participants and vice versa. Although I wanted the interviews to be conversational in tone, I conducted each interview with a set of questions (see tables below) that I had developed prior to the study, what Merriam (2009) calls a “highly structured” interview (p. 103). Using my iPhone to record our dialogue, I stuck mostly to the order and wording of my interview script, although I left room to ask probing questions if I didn’t understand something or wanted to elicit more information. Most of the student interviews occurred in the school library, although I conducted one interview at my university and two interviews by phone. I interviewed Mr. Jones in his
office and Ms. Wright in her classroom.

I used data from interviews at the beginning of the study to inform the direction of the study, particularly to inform my facilitation of the first meeting where teachers and students met together. Much of the dialogue in that meeting was an extension of the interviews. My interview questions at the beginning of the study were designed to gauge student and teacher perceptions about writing assignments. (See Table 4 for Preliminary Interview Questions for Teachers and Students.) The questions for teachers focused on the roles of teachers in designing curriculum, as well as the affordances and constraints as they addressed (or didn’t address) LGBTQ identities and issues in their classrooms. The questions for students focused on their roles as recipients of curriculum and their experiences at school as queer teens.

Table 4

*Preliminary interview questions for teachers and students*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Describe your process for developing lessons and units that guide writing instruction.</td>
<td>1. Describe your experiences as an LGBTQ student at this school and at other schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. In your opinion, do state standards for your content area allow for the exploration of LGBTQ identities and issues?</td>
<td>2. What opportunities have you been given to explore LGBTQ issues and identities through your schoolwork? Through writing assignments?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What opportunities do students in your classes have to explore LGBTQ issues and identities through writing assignments?</td>
<td>3. Why do you think LGBTQ issues and identities have or have not been included in the curriculum?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Why do you think LGBTQ issues and identities have or have not been included in the curriculum at your school and in your classroom?</td>
<td>4. What might be useful additions to curriculum to address LGBTQ issues and identities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What might be useful additions to curriculum to address LGBTQ issues and identities?</td>
<td>5. What might be some meaningful writing activities to enhance the exploration of LGBTQ issues and identities in your classes?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. What might be some meaningful writing activities to enhance the exploration of LGBTQ issues and identities in your classes?

6. In what ways (if any) have you been empowered as an LGBTQ student, as a result of attending this school and/or other experiences outside of school?

The questions at the end of the study attempted to understand the processes and products that resulted from participation. The exit interview questions are listed in Table 5. The major difference between teacher and student interviews was the final question. For teachers, the emphasis was on how participation in the study may influence the development of curriculum in the future, while the student question focused on their perceptions about the work of researchers.

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Describe your participation in the curriculum design project.</td>
<td>1. Describe your participation in the curriculum design project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What did you learn about curriculum and the role of LGBTQ issues and identities as it relates to writing assignments and activities?</td>
<td>2. What did you learn about curriculum and the role of LGBTQ issues and identities as it relates to writing assignments and activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How do you think the participation of LGBTQ students impacts the construction and implementation of curriculum that explores LGBTQ issues and identities? How might lessons and units have looked differently without the participation of LGBTQ students?</td>
<td>3. How do you think the participation of LGBTQ students impacts the construction and implementation of curriculum that explores LGBTQ issues and identities? How might lessons and units have looked differently without the participation of LGBTQ students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. In what ways (if any) will participation in the study influence how you teach writing in the future?</td>
<td>4. What did you learn about research studies, in terms of the methods researchers employ or the findings they generate?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observations of meetings with students and teachers. During Spring 2014,
meetings of the Curriculum Design Team provided a rich source of data for this study. A total of five meetings were held, each running about 90 minutes in length. In March 2014 the students who were participating in the study met with me twice to engage in critique of Common Core standards and writing prompts. In March and April 2014, the Curriculum Design Team, composed of teachers and students, met three times to describe current levels of inclusivity and design writing assignments. (See Table 6 for an overview of meetings and participation.) For each meeting, I collected audio recordings of our dialogue as well as curricular drafts produced by the language arts (LA) and social studies (SS) groups within the Curriculum Design Team. Groups met during the last two meetings only: Daisy, Leah, Willow, and Aria met with Ms. Wright for language arts, while Mr. Jones collaborated with Casey, Kate, and Beatrix in the social studies group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Social Studies Group</th>
<th>Language Arts Group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3/18/2014</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/1/2014</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/8/2014</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/15/2014</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4/22/2014</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

With the Curriculum Design Team split into two groups, in two separate rooms for the sake of audio clarity, I shuttled back and forth from social studies to language arts, occasionally dipping into discussions and offering my own insights as a former teacher and one-time queer youth. After each meeting concluded, I quickly wrote my field notes; later, I reviewed the audio recordings as a means to revise my notes. During the summer
and fall of 2014, audio recordings were fully transcribed. From the transcriptions and field notes, I attempted to build a narrative of the process of teachers and students jointly constructing curriculum.

In regard to interviews and meetings, my goal was to generate what Carspecken (1996) calls “dialogic data” (p. 154), which required me to enter into discussions with participants. Although facilitation of discussions that yield dialogic data are “rarely naturalistic” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 154), I was able to help participants “explore issues with their own vocabulary, their own metaphors, and their own ideas” (Carspecken, 1996, p. 155). At the same time, because I am an educator and queer adult, in addition to university researcher, I purposefully picked spots to contribute to meetings, when I felt my presence could prompt insights or help participants complete activities as part of the design of the study. Much of my involvement was frontloaded, with more structured facilitation during the student meetings and the first CDT meeting, and less structured facilitation during the final two CDT meetings, when the language arts and social studies groups were constructing writing assignments.

Working with students during two meetings without participating teachers present, I was able to prepare students for the complexities of curriculum design, from an educator’s perspective, as well as introduce students to Critical Language Awareness (Fairclough, 2010). Through critical dialogue during two meetings without teachers present, students generated data about curriculum, based on their own experiences, as well as through collaborative analysis of curricular documents. During the student-only meetings, students also underwent preparation in two main areas: curriculum design and Critical Language Awareness.
Curriculum design. In classrooms, students are the recipients of curriculum, and as such, they may not be conscious of the intentional design behind lessons and units. We spent time during our first two meetings (without teachers) sharing perceptions as recipients of curriculum, describing what makes lessons or units engaging, and relating shortcomings in writing assignments in regard to queer identities and issues. We examined 10th grade writing evidence outcomes, drawn from the Colorado Reading, Writing, and Communicating standards, to determine if a coming out story might support the writing standard. We also played Family Feud, a game modeled after the game show on TV, where teams tried to guess what factors influenced the development of curriculum. The question I posed was: what factors influence what is taught in a classroom? Factors that I generated beforehand included: resources; community expectations; time; district/state mandates; department/team planning; teacher interests/abilities; testing; and student needs. Student participants – working together – were ultimately able to guess all of the factors, which some students cited in exit interviews as a memorable aspect of the study. These activities were intended to prepare students to participate in critiquing and producing curriculum with teachers.

Critical Language Awareness. For Fairclough (1995), “the capacity for critique of language” is fundamental to democratic participation (pp. 220-221). Fairclough is the architect of Critical Language Awareness (CLA), which places power as the central concept of analysis, and which describes as well as interprets the relationship of power and Discourses in the construction and representation of the social world (Rogers, 2011, p. 3). Fairclough conceptualizes power “in terms of asymmetries between participants and discourse events, and in terms of unequal capacity to control how texts are produced,
distributed and consumed (and hence the shapes of texts) in particular sociocultural contexts” (1995, pp. 1-2). For Gee, language-in-use always has “situated meaning” (Gee, p. 10). The critical aspect of a situated meaning, Gee believes, has to do with “implications for inherently political things like status, solidarity, the distribution of social goods, and power” (p. 23). The goal in working with students to analyze writing prompts was “discovering the situation-specific or situated meanings of forms used in specific contexts of use” (p. 11), or identifying forms of power that circulate in curricular Discourses, such as writing prompts.

After our first meeting together, I asked students to collect and post writing prompts in a wiki. (See Appendix F for writing prompts.) During our second meeting, students examined a set of writing prompts for “naturalized ideological representations” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 28), or generally accepted values and beliefs, using the following questions:

- What Discourses are represented in the prompt?
- Who is represented in this prompt?
- Who, if anyone, is left out?
- In what ways does the prompt afford or constrain gender performativity?

We started our analysis activity by reading a three-page excerpt from Gee’s (2011) *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis*, entitled “Discourses (with a Big ‘D’),” which defined Discourse and provided examples. We talked about the idea of repeated performances, that playing a sport one day might not establish an identity as an athlete, but that playing for a team, wearing a uniform, and practicing each day might lend itself to constructing an identity as a certain kind of athlete. We talked about how people
possess multiple identities and can shift quickly depending on what they say, do, or wear. Students engaged in an extended discussion about assumptions we make based on common sense. For 25 minutes, students examined values embedded in writing prompts. Regarding a prompt about paternal leave, they wondered why “parental leave” wasn’t used instead and critiqued Discourses that portray traditional families as socially superior. A prompt about adding a year to high school raised questions about outcomes linked to economic participation. A prompt about school uniforms elicited conversation about class and gender, with one student noting that this kind of prompt might promote important dialogue about what a school values even as certain values are embedded in the prompt. By participating in an activity that promoted Critical Language Awareness, students were able to more readily enter into dialogue with teachers to explore, analyze, and disrupt curricular Discourses that address sexuality and gender. Thus, Critical Language Awareness served as an important means to prepare school-age participants to join teachers in evaluating writing assignments during the study.

**Artifacts.** I kept all artifacts generated during this study. Leander (2002) defines an artifact as “any instrument that mediates between subjects in interaction and the object of their activity” (p. 201). Artifacts like curriculum documents mediate the production of identity (Leander, 2002). In an effort to mediate queer identities, the team of teachers and students designed writing assignments that included texts that affirm, explore, and contest Discourses about members of the queer community. I received writing assignment outlines produced by the Curriculum Design Team as an electronic copy from the language arts group and a hard copy from the social studies group (see Appendices D and E). I saved writing prompts that students contributed to our writing prompt analysis.
activity (prior to meeting with teachers). Other artifacts included nameplates, which were Chinet plates that students and teachers drew pictures on to represent what was on their plate at the time, such as activities, challenges, responsibilities, and so on. The also wrote on the nameplate the pseudonym they wished for me to use when referring to them in the study. Finally, I kept students’ applications to participate in the study, which were useful in creating the profiles listed in Table 1.

**Data Analysis**

Data analysis transpired along the same lines as data collection, in that I collaborated with students to perform some data analysis activities. An advantage of including youth in data analysis, according to Sabo-Flores (2007), is that “they understand subtle subtexts that adults will never catch because of their distance from the youth culture” (p. 147). In the following sections, I describe how the methods employed in this study warrant the plausibility of this study’s findings.

**Data analysis process.** Maxwell (2005) advocates for having what he calls a “tentative plan” (p. 81), or having structures in place during a research study while still making room for emerging insights (pp. 80-81). My “tentative plan” utilized grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as a method of incorporating an inductive approach to data collection and analysis, even as I worked from a set of defined research questions. I had some hunches, for example, about the usefulness of students and teachers collaborating on curriculum design, and I framed my study deductively to investigate those hunches. At the same time, I tried to approach data with fresh eyes. While I attempted to stay true to my plan for data collection and analysis, I also allowed data to inform the direction of the study. For example, after the preliminary set of interviews
yielded rich insights from students and teachers about curricular inclusivity, I decided to use some of the same questions when I met with both teachers and students for the first time, so teachers could hear directly from students and vice versa. Initially, I had hoped teachers and students would start developing writing assignments during their first meeting together, but the data from the preliminary interviews told me I needed to facilitate a more general discussion about the nature of literacy curriculum instead.

Throughout the study, I continued to analyze data as I was collecting it, as a means to inform upcoming data collection activities. This initial look at the data was part of a larger recursive process, in which I continuously revisited data as I collected, analyzed, and drafted, a process of “spiraling” described by Eisenhart (2013). Spiraling meant setting aside coding, for example, and simply re-reading transcripts of meetings and interviews. Spiraling also meant continually revisiting my research questions. My goal, as I analyzed data and wrote the results chapters, was to elevate the voices of students and teachers, even as I engaged in meaning making activities.

An ongoing cycle of listening to audio recordings, re-reading transcripts, writing, and discussion proved to be generative throughout the process of data analysis. I produced field notes after each visit to Coolidge. I wrote memos throughout the entire process of analyzing data, including memos about movies, books, and Web sites mentioned by students during the study. Each interview and meeting was catalogued, transcribed, and then uploaded into InVivo, a qualitative data analysis software program that allows users to create, arrange, and revise codes for data. Categories and subcategories (see Table 8) emerged after coding meeting and interview transcripts, and were refined as I wrote memos about patterns I observed from data reports. Coding
reports from InVivo, which contained related sections of text taken from interview and meeting transcripts, enabled me to search for patterns across a large quantity of participant talk. Patterns began to emerge as I classified codes into “similar clusters” (Saldaña, 2014, p. 587). Table 7 lists data analysis activities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data analysis activities</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• jotting marginal notes on transcripts of interviews, meetings, and curricular artifacts</td>
<td>• open coding as a means to describe what is emerging from data sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• writing memos about codes derived from marginal notes</td>
<td>• consolidating and clarifying codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• applying codes to data with InVivo qualitative computer program</td>
<td>• perceiving patterns in data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• sorting coded data reports into computer desktop file folders</td>
<td>• classifying data into a scheme of categories, to include “Curricular Discourses,” “Queer and Queering Discourses,” and “Meeting Dynamics”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• writing memos about categories and subcategories</td>
<td>• developing properties of categories via combination, reduction, and refining of subcategories (see Table 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• employing writing and discussion activities to generate tentative themes</td>
<td>• comparing properties of categories across data (connecting back to meetings, interviews, and artifacts, as well as literature review)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• examining themes across data</td>
<td>• purging nonworking themes; developing emerging theories in relation to theoretical framework</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I analyzed and organized clusters of codes into folders on my computer’s desktop, which resulted in three working categories that contributed to my results chapters. “Curricular Discourses” served as the basis for the results chapter on choice and modeling, which included descriptions of curriculum as experienced by students at
Coolidge as well as what they envisioned for inclusive writing assignments. The categories of “Queer and Queering Discourses” and “Meeting Dynamics” formed a chapter that explored the queer sensibility student participants brought to meetings. Within these categories, I was able to develop themes as I arranged and rearranged coding reports in folders placed into each of the three categories. Bryant (2014) advises that researchers who use grounded theory consider their literature review as a set of data within the scope of their study. Themes came into sharper focus as I compared them to findings from my literature review, particularly as I noted how students in the study perceived opportunities to explore queer identities and issues through performances enacted via writing assignments. Analytic memos also helped to define themes as I compared data sets across the study and connected themes back to my research questions and my theoretical framework. Table 8 shows the levels of analysis that led to my findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Levels of analysis</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Results Chapter: “Mediating and Enacting Performances through the Construction of Writing Assignments”
   a. Category: Curricular Discourses
      i. Subcategory: Inadequate experiences with writing assignments at Coolidge
      ii. Themes:
         1. Queer topics are easier for teachers to avoid than address
         2. Queer topics are student-initiated
         3. Queer topics are explored in extracurricular settings
         4. When students explore queer topics, they produce meaningful writing
      iii. Subcategory: Choice has utility in making space for queer performances via writing assignments
      iv. Themes:
         1. Standards and choice are not mutually exclusive
         2. Legal Discourses and community pressure position choice as a compromise
         3. Choice is a widely circulated and accepted marketplace Discourse
   v. Subcategory: Modeling is vital for more inclusive writing assignments
   vi. Themes:
      1. Choice and modeling as mediated in student meetings
      2. Choice and modeling as mediated in the 1st CDT meeting
      3. Choice and modeling utilized to build writing assignments in Social Studies
group meetings

4. Choice and modeling utilized to build writing assignments in ELA group meetings

vii. Subcategory: Finessing choice and modeling is a means to promote visibility and performativity in literacy activities

viii. Themes:
1. Why and how to reach beyond school-sanctioned texts
2. Plotting a course between ignorance and indoctrination

2. Results Chapter: “Queer Sensibility for the Straight Curriculum”
   a. Category: Queer meeting dynamics
      i. Subcategory: Power relations shift by virtue of roles taken in meetings
      ii. Themes:
         1. Turn-taking dominated by students
         2. Roles played by teachers (facilitation and collaboration)
         3. Roles played by students (knowledge authorities)
         4. Humor as fun and subversive
         5. Student language usage as knowledge authorities
   b. Category: Queer Discourses and Queering Discourses
      i. Subcategory: Students held unique perspectives as curriculum recipients
      ii. Themes:
         1. Students engaged in in-depth processing about assignment logistics
         2. Student exhibited styles and preferences for learning
      iii. Subcategory: Students conveyed Discourses from the outside in
      iv. Themes:
         1. Student knowledge had logical and emotional characteristics
         2. Students contested and embraced Discourses around queer visibility, identity, and humanity

In schools, language and power intersect in the identity artifact that is curriculum. Because curriculum development is traditionally the domain of educators, issues of language and power informed and influenced conversations among teachers and students in the study. Students’ recommendations for inclusive writing assignments, how participants interacted in meetings, and what Discourses students surfaced in meetings emerged as the most urgent narratives to tell. Regarding themes that developed from Discourses that surfaced during meetings, Gee (2009) says that many possible contexts can be identified for participant utterances. He advises researchers to pay attention to what participants value:

All discourse analysts can do to deal with the frame problem is offer arguments that the aspects of context they have considered, in a particular piece of research,
are the important and relevant ones for the people whose language is being studied and for the analytic purpose of the researcher. Further, the researcher or other researchers can seek out additional aspects of context and see if this changes, in significant ways, the original analysis offered. Of course, they can never exhaust all potentially significant aspects of context—that is, indeed, what the frame problem is all about. In that sense, discourse analysis, at the level of situated meanings, is always open to further revision as we learn more about the context of the data analyzed. This, indeed, is typical of all interpretive methods of research. (Gee, 2009, pp. 21-22)

In this study, I elevated student voices as a means to determine what participants valued, specifically during the process of data collection and analysis.

**Checks and balances.** A variety of data collection and data analysis provided checks and balances as I produced my findings. Merriam (1995) writes, “If the researcher hears about the phenomenon in interviews, sees it taking place in observations, and reads about it in pertinent documents, he or she can be confident that the ‘reality’ of the situation, as perceived by those in it, is being conveyed as ‘truthfully’ as possible” (p. 54). Interviews prior to and after meetings of the Curriculum Design Team helped to confirm and inform findings from meeting transcripts. In addition, I used the curriculum documents produced by the social studies and language arts groups to cross-check findings from CDT meetings, particularly in regard to student recommendations about curriculum. One tension I discovered in comparing sets of data, as an example, was the absence of evidence to support a key finding based on the writing assignments produced by participants. As I cross-checked the theme of teacher modeling from interview and
meeting transcripts to curricular artifacts produced by the language arts and social studies
groups, I noticed teacher modeling was absent from their writing assignments outline.
Later, I was able to attribute the absence largely to a lack of a prompt about instructional
strategies in a set of guiding questions I provided to participants. Nevertheless, the
absence of modeling in one data set sent me back to other sources of data, to ascertain if
modeling was a truly meaningful category for data analysis.

Member checks aligned with this study’s efforts to employ democratic methods of
data collection and analysis. Merriam (1995) defines member checks as “taking data
collected from study participants, and the tentative interpretations of these data, back to
the people from whom they were derived and asking if the interpretations are plausible, if
they ‘ring true’” (p. 54). Out of respect for the time of teachers and students, I did not ask
any study participants to examine transcripts of interviews and meetings. Instead,
transcriptions were produced by an online transcription service, and then I listened to
audio files as I read through transcriptions, correcting errors and interpreting garbled
audio based on my understanding and remembrance of contexts.

Students participated in member checks of my results. At the invitation of Daisy
(a study participant), I attended a G.S.A. meeting on April 29, 2015. I shared a few
sections from the choice and modeling chapter, and solicited feedback from the seven
meeting attendees, which included three study participants, Beatrix, Casey, and Daisy. In
general, these three student participants found the chapter to accurately reflect their
participation in the study. Other G.S.A. members who did not participate in the study said
the findings resonated with their experiences at Coolidge. (I did not audio record this
meeting.) I also emailed a draft of the curriculum results chapter to all nine participants in
May 2015. Only one student, Daisy, replied with feedback about the chapter. In an email, Daisy wrote:

The chapter is amazing! I feel the focus group and all the issues discussed are very accurately represented and analyzed. I wish I had more constructive comments but I am really just a fan of all of it. I like how it is an academic paper but has a bit of a narrative tone to it, it kept me engaged while I was reading. I am so grateful to you for getting the voice of the LGBTQIA student out into the community. It means the world to me that I got to participate in this process. (Daisy, personal communication, May 10, 2015)

Aria provided a final member check when she read and commented on my entire dissertation in June 2015. Because Aria had taken courses at the university (since graduating from Coolidge) that drew on feminist and queer theories, she offered insights, wording, and resources to inform my interpretation of data. She affirmed my finding that while Coolidge had an accepting climate, the curriculum was not very inclusive of queer issues and identities. About my finding on teacher modeling, she commented: “I think this was the most commonly shared experience amongst participants. Even though there are so many opportunities to incorporate queer topics and for students to write on them, without a teacher instructing the possibility of writing on such it didn’t feel like an option” (Aria, personal communication, June 22, 2015). Aria’s comments, in addition to the feedback from other student participants, serve to bolster the plausibility of my findings.

In September 2014 I had the opportunity to meet with two student participants, Leah and Aria, to review some data together. I had collated responses to two questions from the student preliminary interviews: Why do you think LGBTQ issues and identities
have or have not been included in the curriculum? What might be useful additions to curriculum to address LGBTQ issues and identities? As we sat in a conference room on campus (Leah and Aria were attending the same university as me), we looked for patterns across the seven student interviews, each of us jotting notes on the transcriptions. Our preliminary findings (see Table 9 for patterns we identified together) formed the kernel of one of my findings chapters, and served as a lens onto analysis of transcriptions of the meetings of the Curriculum Design Team.

Our discussion about data from student interviews evolved into a presentation at an English language arts state conference. With 30 educators in attendance at our session, Aria, Leah, and I described our participation in the study, as well as first-blush findings about the willingness and capacity of teachers in exploring queer issues and identities in writing assignments. About half of the session was devoted to question-and-answer with the audience. While I didn’t capture the session with an audio recording, the general consensus was that our findings were plausible. Many teachers acknowledged they didn’t necessarily know how to make their curriculum more inclusive. The educators in attendance sought practical ways, like the teachers in the study, to address queer issues and identities in language arts curriculum. By asking educators to “comment on the plausibility of the emerging findings,” we engaged in what Merriam calls “peer/colleague examination” (pp. 54-55). As they interacted with educators during the session, Leah and Aria shared their own insights as well conveyed data gathered from Curriculum Design Team Meetings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Patterns in data identified by Aria, Leah, and Mike from student preliminary interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why are LGBTQ issues and identities not included</th>
<th>How can teachers incorporate LGBTQ issues and</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>


The participation of students in the data analysis process was helpful to me in keeping a student perspective at the center of the chapters I have written. A limitation in the validity of my findings was that neither Mr. Jones nor Ms. Wright responded to my requests for member checks. Kate, who is straight, and Willow, who identified as a lesbian, also did not participate in member checks. In hindsight, I wish I could have engaged students in more data analysis activities, but given the parameters of the study and the limitations on students’ time (they were busy), the activity with Leah and Aria yielded some useful information as well as fueled my interest to include students in data analysis for future studies.

My goal is to continue to work with students to share findings from the study, if they wish. Presenting findings to Coolidge staff, district-level staff, at conferences like the Statewide Convening on LGBT Youth, and among peers in their classes or at their G.S.A. meetings would be a positive experience for study participants, and would add credibility to the findings. Sabo-Flores (2007) suggests letting students take the lead in this process. Student presentations can take a number of forms, such as videos, posters, performances, memos, reports, speeches, etc., although students should include the same elements that any researcher would share: goals, research questions, methods, findings, and conclusions (Sabo-Flores, 2007). Ongoing presentations with students will continue.
to strengthen the validity of this study’s findings.

**My Role as a Participant Researcher**

Maxwell discusses the importance of personal goals, which can motivate a researcher even as other obligations or diversions beckon. Personal goals do not necessarily taint the findings of social research. The personal experiences of a researcher can inform and influence the design and implementation of a qualitative study in productive ways. As a gay teacher who taught middle and high school English language arts for 16 years, I’m inclined to believe there are many teachers like me who might empathize with queer students but still avoid any mention of queer issues or identities, out of fear or ignorance. As someone who grew up gay (but closeted), I possess personal experiences that are similar to national survey findings that show how oppressive schools can be for queer youth. As a queer graduate student studying the experiences of queer youth in schools, I have developed through wide reading a notion that many young people are empowered even as they are oppressed. Therefore, a personal goal for me has been to build capacity among students and educators to design curriculum that communicates to queer youth that school is a safe space, so that no young person erases their sexuality as I did in school.

Given my past experiences as an educator and as a gay youth, it was necessary for me to transparently enter into the study as a participant and a researcher, as a means to enhance my credibility and the credibility of the study’s findings among other participants as well as among scholars. Part of building trust was sharing why this study matters to me, which required that I share my own stories with teachers, students, and scholars. In that vein, at my first meeting with student (no teachers present), I read a story
aloud about trying to come-out to my junior high school librarian (see Appendix C).

Disclosing this story from my teen years was crucial to building community with students in the study, because they wanted to know that participants in the study (especially me) were informed and empathetic. Even as I attempted to facilitate dialogue among participants during interviews and meetings, my own voice was added to their voices. Even as I attempted to conduct a research study, emotions like pride, sadness, anger, and joy were present as a result of my interactions with other participants and numerous readings of their transcribed dialogue. It can be a limitation if a researcher’s convictions, rather than data, construct the findings. Being an outsider to Coolidge High School, as well as a member of the research community, gave me a different perspective than students and teachers who participated in the study.

Winn and Paris (2013) suggest that too many researchers take from communities but don’t give back. When designing this study, I considered having someone else facilitate the meetings so I could sit in a corner and record my observations. One of my committee members talked me into taking a much more active role. Research that places value on social justice should be characterized by give and take, and so I felt compelled to lend my voice and my ear to discussions among students and teachers. I also feel compelled to continue to engage with students and teachers who participated in the study, as a means to spread whatever wisdom we gleaned to others who think queer students should be represented in the curriculum, but might not know how to do it.

And finally, as principal investigator of the study, I embraced the “productive tensions” raised in youth participatory projects (Kirshner, 2010, p. 242). Even as I place value on what Blackburn (2013) describes as “omnidirectional” mentoring (p. 49), where
youth provide direction to adults, I also recognized as I combed through data that young people may possess perspectives that call for critique, especially if their perspectives perpetuate discrimination or are simply uninformed. In their study of an urban school that was closed in spite of student objections, Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) described their favorable inclination toward youth perspectives, as well as the strong feelings student-researchers possessed about the closure of their school. Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) advise researchers (both students and adults) to discuss the role of perspective in a research study and develop strategies to question Discourses present during the study, which I did in this study. Finally, Kirshner and Pozzoboni (2011) suggest that researchers should collect, analyze, and even present data that disconfirms their findings. One theme I drew from data, based on some instances where students and teachers reproduced dominant Discourses, was “Participant Normativity.” Sometimes students and teachers called out normativity when they sensed reproduction of certain harmful Discourses in meetings; sometimes they did not. Thus, even as youth perspectives were valued in dialogue with adults, I also recognized how our dialogue might have reproduced certain Discourses that we sought to expose. By sharing responsibilities for the design of writing assignments, two teachers and seven students have become better equipped to recognize and respond to ideologies present in school curriculum, particularly curriculum that is mandated or scripted by commercial, political, bureaucratic, or community entities.
Results: Mediating and Enacting Performances through the Construction of Writing Assignments

Most people I've talked to realize they're gay end of eighth grade, beginning of freshman year. If I was able to deal with that through writing as a freshman in freshman LA (language arts), I think that would have been really beneficial to me, and I might have felt less alone and less like an enigma. –Daisy

Introduction

In spite of the progressive reputation of Coolidge in regard to fostering inclusivity, the seven students who participated in this study said they had few opportunities to address queer issues and identities through writing assignments. They did not fault their teachers for the scarcity of inclusive writing activities; instead, they attributed erasure of queer issues and identities to homophobic and heteronormative Discourses, which influence what is taught in schools. History and literature, students emphasized, could provide rich resources for exploring and contesting Discourses that construct identities for queer youth. To disrupt Discourses that erase queer identities and issues from the curriculum, all of the students in the study recommended that their teachers provide a greater array of reading and writing choices, with texts that incorporate queer topics and themes. The writing assignments developed by the social studies and language arts groups emphasized choices for students regarding resources, topics, and genres.

Choice is often heralded as a strategy for meeting diverse students’ needs and sparking interest in activities and assignments (Tomlinson, 2003; Fletcher, 2006; Quate & McDermott, 2009; McKenna & Robinson, 2014). With regards to sexuality and gender, students in the study named choice as a way to satisfy the needs and interests of students
as consumers of curriculum, while also placating parents and community members who might not be happy to hear that gender and sexuality are topics of study in their child’s school. By expanding choice in writing assignments, student participants saw opportunities for queer youth to explore queer issues and perform non-normative identities, as well as to nurture queer visibility in the classroom. Across the board, students in the study insisted that engaging with sexuality and gender through curricular choice can help to avoid negative repercussions for teachers and schools, while interrupting pervasive silences.

Some of the student participants suggested the value of choice is compromised when teachers do not support students in writing productively or precisely about queer topics. If a teacher does not demonstrate the possibility of selecting queer topics, many students will not consider the possibility of selecting queer topics. Also, some of the student participants described situations where the teacher did not frontload assignments in ways that addressed homophobia, causing students who pursued queer topics to face scorn from classmates. In addition, student participants suggested some of their classmates who were granted the option to address queer topics might badly mishandle or abuse the opportunity, by oversexualizing queer people or invoking homophobic viewpoints. Student participants – without exception – suggested modeling by the teacher is also necessary when students are given choice to read and write about queer topics.

*Modeling* is an instructional practice in which a teacher demonstrates products or processes and then encourages student imitation (Meichenbaum, 1977; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Kittle, 2008; Gee, 2012). Students in the study believed modeling by the teacher paves the way for students to consider queer topics for writing assignments,
as well as to write more skillfully once a queer topic has been selected. Throughout interviews and meetings, student participants insisted that teachers must offer choice in books to read and topics to write about and provide modeling for what writing assignments might look like.

This chapter addresses the research question, *How do members of the Curriculum Design Team understand the role of high school writing assignments in contributing to the construction and performance of gender and sexuality?* The chapter begins with a description of curricular conditions at Coolidge High School at the time of the study, specifically focusing on writing assignments. Students shared their understanding of choice as a strategic means to insert queer issues and identities into the curriculum. Students asserted that choice can effectively address legal and market Discourses operating in schools, without compromising mandates around state standards. During meetings of the Curriculum Design Team, student participants mediated ways for teachers to consider incorporating choice and modeling so that queer issues and identities can be thoughtfully studied in the classroom. As students and teachers in the study collaborated on inclusive writing assignments, they used choice and modeling to finesse what they perceived to be tension between ignorance and indoctrination regarding queer issues and identities. This chapter also addresses the research question, *In what ways do curricular artifacts produced by teachers and queer students foster visibility and accessibility of non-normative performances of gender and sexuality via writing assignments?* A major aspect of students’ curricular work with teachers, described later in this chapter, was expanding notions of literacy (or choices) beyond the narrow band of texts offered in school, which is evident in the writing assignments produced by the
language arts and social studies groups. This chapter concludes with teacher takeaways and student reflections, gleaned from exit interviews, about the role of writing assignments in the mediation of non-normative performances of gender and sexuality.

**Inadequate Experiences with Writing Assignments at Coolidge**

“I always thought that would be really meaningful,” Aria told teachers during the first Curriculum Design Team meeting, “for this generation to read a book that was centered around someone who identified LGBTQ” (Aria, CDT#1). This section describes a void in curriculum where queer issues and identities are concerned. Leah said, “I feel like (teachers) changed the way they talk, maybe, but they're not actively pushing to help change the way others talk” (Leah, Preliminary Interview). Beatrix surmised that teachers might find queer topics “easier to avoid than address” in the classroom (Beatrix, Preliminary Interview). This section also describes opportunities students and teachers said they experienced in exploring queer topics and issues through reading, writing, and discussion. Both students and teachers explained that queer topics and issues were typically initiated in the classroom by students. Student participants said they found meaningful opportunities to explore queer issues and identities in extracurricular activities. Finally, both students and teachers appreciated when students capitalized on opportunities provided by teachers to produce well-constructed and meaningful texts about queer issues or identities. While the curriculum at Coolidge did offer space at times to explore topics around sexuality and gender, they wanted the curriculum to be much more inclusive and expansive.

**Queer topics in the classroom: “Easier to avoid than address.”** In interviews prior to our team meetings, students in the study offered their thoughts about the
exclusion of queer identities and issues from the curriculum. Aria stated, “We read books to learn more about poverty and racial differences, but not necessarily gender and sexuality differences” (Aria, Preliminary Interview). Leah agreed: “I would say outside of health class, we haven't really talked too much about LGTBQ anything” (Leah, Preliminary Interview). In referring to literature that examines oppression and celebrates culture, Willow said, “I feel a lot of other identities are acknowledged, but mine isn't as much” (Willow, Preliminary Interview). Casey guessed that the reason queer topics were rarely addressed by teachers was because “it’s not built into the curriculum” (Casey, Preliminary Interview). Leah and Willow suggested there might be too little time to include queer topics, especially in history, since teachers were under so much pressure to cover required content. Ms. Wright confirmed students’ hypotheses, saying she inherited a curriculum largely devoid of LGBTQ issues and identities. “Our curriculum itself doesn’t bring up any of these issues,” she said. “They don’t come up unless a kid says, ‘Hey, think about it this way’” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview). Negative reactions among students at Coolidge to queer issues and identities may have also inhibited inclusion, as Beatrix noted: “The one thing that I have seen is a lot of people ask, ‘Oh, why do we need to talk about this? Why do we need to work on this?’” (Beatrix, Preliminary Interview). According to students in the study, there was little impetus for Coolidge teachers to mediate queer issues and identities in curriculum, in spite of the welcoming climate of the school, so that the onus of elevating queer issues and identities was placed directly on students.

Exploring queer topics: “That was of my own choice.” When queer identities and issues materialized in classrooms at Coolidge, often it was because students initiated
dialogue during open-ended discussions, or pursued a personally meaningful topic in a writing assignment. Willow stated, “Obviously, there are some circumstances where you could choose a topic related to that. For example, if you wanted to do a current event on gay rights, it's not discouraged or anything. But we're never told, look up something about this thing having to do with gay rights” (Willow, Preliminary Interview). Student participants exercised choice in different types of writing across the curriculum. Daisy found space in her AP Language course to explore queer issues: “For the AP test, one of the essay formats we'll write is use literary, historical, and current event evidence. If it's something that involves oppression or societal norms, or something like that, there's room to talk about gay issues, especially since it's really prevalent now, with marriage equality, and stuff like that” (Daisy, Student Meeting #1). Kate explored “negative body issues” in her Digital Design class through an animated video, and argued for societal acceptance of non-traditional families in a writing assignment for her senior English language arts class (Kate, CDT#2_SS). When Willow’s IB English class had to write speeches, she said, “I chose an essay out of a book that had to do with the AIDS epidemic and the gay culture in the 70s which is really interesting to me. But that was of my own choice and we hadn't read that in class at all” (Willow, Preliminary Interview). Leah explored her sexuality in her college application essay. Aria’s literary analysis of Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* examined the role of gender expression and self-identification in the play. When given latitude on what they could write about, students in the study tended to choose topics and explore identities that mattered to them.

On the other hand, students noted that simply offering choice doesn’t always lead to affirming educational experiences. Casey described a health class project “where you
could write about anything related to health” (Casey, Preliminary Interview). The assignment was wide-open for any student who might be curious about queer health issues to select and explore a meaningful topic. But choice of topics did not necessarily yield a queer-themed paper, because, according to Casey, “no one really thinks of those things (LGBTQ issues) as a health topic” (Casey, Preliminary Interview). And if a student were to risk writing about a queer health topic, the repercussions were potentially harmful, as Casey went on to relate:

One girl did a thing on sexuality and things like that. But you could tell that everyone in the room thought that it was a joke. It was sad. I was wishing that I had thought of it. But after seeing the reaction in the room, I was happy that I hadn’t. It was a little bit weird to realize how negatively it seemed they were reacting. A lot of the kids were almost laughing during what she was talking about. It was just all weird. (Casey, Preliminary Interview)

Casey’s anecdote complicates the notion of choice, and suggests that teachers need to assert a stronger role in framing choice. But, according to student participants, rarely did teachers at Coolidge require or even suggest queer topics for writing assignments, nor did they frame choice in ways that made writing about queer issues and identities a safe possibility. Instead, students safely explored queer issues and identities on the fringes of their school day, typically in extracurricular activities.

**Extracurriculars: “My favorite part of being here at Coolidge.”** For students in the study, extracurricular activities offered safe spaces for affirmation and exploration of queer issues and identities. All of the students in the study, for example, participated in Gay-Straight Alliance (G.S.A.), which met once a week during lunch. Students played
games, enacted scenarios, talked about current issues and personal matters, and planned events, such as attending a local queer youth advocacy conference. Diversity Week was another extracurricular activity that impacted the students in the study. As seniors, Kate, Leah, and Aria had participated extensively in this week devoted to exploring difference, first as members of the 9th grade audience and then as panelists. Leah explained,

Diversity Panel is a panel of usually six, eight students that goes around to Coolidge’s freshman seminar classes. Every freshman is required to take freshman seminar. It keeps them up-to-date on homework and stuff. For one week of November out of the year, it's Diversity Week. We go around and it's a panel of different people. Some people might have experienced divorce, disabilities in their own lives or their siblings’ lives, and you get a five to ten minute period of time to talk about diversity or adversity in your life. (Leah, Preliminary Interview)

Among the topics they discussed while serving on the panel were disability, mental health, and LGBTQ issues. Leah said serving as a panelist was “probably my favorite part of being here at Coolidge” (Leah, Preliminary Interview). Diversity Week introduced topics about difference to students in ways that might not occur in content area learning, with older students mediating diverse performances for younger students.

Students found clubs as a niche in the school that fostered acceptance and understanding of non-normative identities. About extracurricular activities at Coolidge, Ms. Wright noted, “We have a club for everything you can possibly imagine, you know. And there are a lot of organizations here that are meant to be supportive to kids” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview). The band program, for example, was cited by Aria as a safe space for queer students (Aria, Preliminary Interview). When classes did not provide
an outlet for exploring and affirming queer issues and identities, extracurricular activities provided students with safe spaces to perform identities that were otherwise marginalized in curriculum, albeit on the fringes of the school day. While students appreciated being supported in their extracurricular activities, they also appreciated when their teachers facilitated opportunities to explore queer identities and issues in their classrooms.

**Appreciation of free writing: “It’s beautiful what they can do.”** Participants described choice as a common instructional practice at Coolidge High School. For example, writing activities in Ms. Wright’s classes included choice of topics through what she called “writing invitations.” When writing in class, she offered prompts for students to address, but also instructed, “If you are not feeling it… or you do not like that topic, go somewhere else. I say you have to write, but you do not have to write on the topic that we’re writing on” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). Students in her classes also wrote blog posts based on topics they had generated. Ms. Wright liked the idea that students were not confined to teacher-constructed topics: “I have kids writing about how hard it is to get a date, how it makes them feel weird. They talk about their sexuality in it. They talk about home issues, things with their parents. I had a kid last year write about his mom, who was an alcoholic, how that affected him” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview). Students wrote for themselves initially, but were eventually required to select one piece to revise, submit to the teacher, and possibly share with the class. As a result, Ms. Wright came to know her students better, and her students came to know each other better, too: “And they have an option to share out loud, on the day that the final one is due. They can choose to read out loud. And some of those pieces… I’ve had kids like, crying. They’re so moved. It’s just so cool” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview).
Students were able to extend the flexibility in topics to explore other genres, too, such as poetry, short stories, and satire. The power of writing invitations, according to Ms. Wright, was that students “are writing about something that finally matters to them, that they’re really invested in. And it’s beautiful what they can do” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview). When offered choices on what to write about, Ms. Wright felt students produced meaningful and proficient written work, which for some students veered into oral and written performances of gender and sexuality. A caveat raised by student participants is that offering choice is only half the equation, with modeling by the teacher as an essential practice for exploring and affirming queer issues and identities. Nevertheless, students found choice to be an expedient means to insert queer issues and identities into the curriculum. I will describe students’ recommendations to teachers about modeling later in this chapter.

The Utility of Choice in Making Space for Queer Performances via Writing Assignments

Because choice was already part of their school experience, it was not difficult for students and teachers in the study to expand the notion of choice to include queer texts and writing activities. Study participants measured the utility of curricular choice in regard to state standards, legal ramifications, and market pressures. Students portrayed choice as a compromise to full inclusion of queer issues and identities in the curriculum, not a perfect solution but rather a first step toward greater visibility.

Standards and choice. Both teachers and students in the study evaluated the utility of choice in the context of state standards and content coverage. In Colorado, the four standards for Reading, Writing, and Communicating (2010) incorporate the Common Core standards. I sat on a committee that helped to produce the first draft of the
Reading, Writing, and Communicating standards, which the Colorado Department of Education then wrapped around the Common Core, in an effort to align with other states and win Race to the Top funding. The writing standard identifies three modes of writing for students to produce: expository, persuasive, and expressive. Within the three modes, skills are delineated by grade level. Conventions and processes are listed separately from the modes, as a means to emphasize craft in writing. Across the four years of high school, students are expected to produce writing with increasing complexity. Colorado Reading, Writing, and Communicating standards serve as a roadmap for creating lessons and units of study, but do not prescribe specific content or instruction.

During our first student meeting, students examined copies of the Colorado Reading, Writing, and Communicating standards (2010), specifically the 10th grade writing standard (Colorado Department of Education, pp. 21-23), to determine if any of the eleven evidence outcomes could be met by writing about identity. Students quickly highlighted a number of words and phrases from the standards document and shared their thoughts, noting that expressive writing about identity could incorporate dialogue, address audience, include imagery, and move a writer through the writing process. For Leah, the most surprising finding was that personal narrative could address many of the skills listed in the standards. “Focusing on narrative writing and poetic writing is where we need to start with (writing about queer issues and identities),” she said, because the language of the writing standard is “open” (Leah, Student Meeting #1). The flexibility of writing standard language around narrative, they discovered, could enable students to perform their own coming out stories or perspectives of queer characters found in literature. Meanwhile, Casey and Daisy also saw possibilities for exploring queer
identities and issues in persuasive and informational modes. They cited gender binaries, oppression, equality, and societal norms as possible issues to write about when given a choice in topics. While the state writing standard specifies modes and skills, students found plenty of room to explore queer identities and issues within these broad categories.

For the teachers in the study, incorporating choice of texts and topics in their curriculum was feasible as long as they could still find ways to cover content and bolster skills that are outlined by content area standards. Ms. Wright believed flexibility is inherent in the English language arts: “We have – in certain classes – more flexibility as far as literature” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview). For Ms. Wright, choice novels fostered fluency and a love for reading. She exhorted her students to “Read, read. Did you finish it? Good. Pick up another one. Read!” (Ms. Wright, CDT#1). Ms. Wright suggested that writing assignments and activities could be flexible while still meeting important benchmarks. Writing invitations develop voice in student writing, which is a trait prized by English teachers, AP exams, and college admissions officers. “Because we’re talking about human experience so much,” Ms. Wright said in an interview, “we definitely have some (flexibility) available to us. And I think we can easily integrate (queer-themed texts)” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview). Choice in English language arts is not difficult for Ms. Wright to imagine or execute, in spite of pressure to meet content area standards.

In the first meeting of the Curriculum Design Team, Mr. Jones wondered if including queer topics in summative assessments would lead to responses that demonstrated proficiency for the scope of a unit of study. For him, content coverage was an issue: “This is like, ‘Well, this is your two questions.’ You get one of those two
questions. How can I frame it, so that within history we can come to a key question that relates back to what we've been talking about in that unit?” (Mr. Jones, CDT#1) A question that focused exclusively on queer issues or queer historical figures could narrow the scope of a student’s response so that a history teacher could perceive the content hadn’t been adequately addressed. By the second meeting of the Curriculum Design Team, however, Mr. Jones fully embraced the idea of choice. As he sat with the social studies group, Casey, Beatrix, and Kate brainstormed ideas about advertisements, such as how ads mirror social issues and social movements over time, or how ads could address social maladies. Offering options was a key aspect of the assignment they were envisioning. After five minutes, Mr. Jones interrupted excitedly, “I’m going there!” (Mr. Jones, CDT#2_SS) Discussion about choice jogged a memory of a meaningful assignment that he completed for a European History class in college: “The final project was you can pick anyone in history – anyone – and write your paper on how they’ve changed the way things are done. I, of course, at that point in time, was very into my Irish heritage, so I chose someone who's Irish to write about” (Mr. Jones, CDT#2_SS). For Mr. Jones, the freedom to pick any historical figure to write about enabled him to affirm his Irish identity. He began to sketch out a similar assignment, with broad parameters to allow students to dig into primary documents and write a research paper that would “explain and argue why this person changed the world” (Mr. Jones, CDT#2_SS). When Beatrix suggested studying people who made little or no splash in the annals of history, like a 1700’s midwife, Mr. Jones conceded to an even broader conception of the assignment: “You can do somebody who’s not on the list,” he told Beatrix. “You just have to… clear it with the teacher. Tell me your thought process and how you’re going to
use that” (Mr. Jones, CDT#2_SS). Even with choices expanding beyond the pantheon of prominent historical figures, Mr. Jones believed content coverage would not be diminished by an array of topics. Both teachers and students in the study believed embedding options into writing assignments would not hinder students from meeting standards or teachers from covering content. Students (not teachers) did express concern, however, that including queer issues and identities in the curriculum might incite parents and community members, and choice was viewed as a way to avoid legal trouble.

**Legal Discourses, community pressure, and choice.** More than anyone in the study, Casey exhibited a heightened sensitivity about controversy being ignited by the inclusion of queer texts and queer writing assignments. Because her mom was a lawyer, Casey felt she understood why “teachers have to put a disclaimer before they talk about things, like LGBTQ issues or religion” (Casey, Student Meeting #1). “They (teachers) have to dance around these topics,” she argued, “because otherwise the school might get sued” (Casey, Student Meeting #1). Casey repeatedly offered legal interpretations about curriculum and the law. In an interview, Casey described choice – as opposed to requiring everyone to read queer texts – as a way to tamp down negative reactions from the community:

For a history thing, maybe you could have three different topics that you can choose from, like maybe you're doing rights movements. You can have like the Black Civil Rights Movement and you could have the whole AIDS thing or something like that. It's one of the options. That way, if the kid wants to do it, they have the opportunity. But if they are uncomfortable with it, they don't have to and their parents won't come running screaming saying, “You made my child
do this. Don't make them do this.” (Casey, Preliminary Interview)

“Uncomfortable” children and “screaming” parents loomed large as Casey imagined how her teachers might have to mediate queer writing assignments. Regarding a drama activity where gender fluidity was encouraged by the teacher, Casey shared her legal opinion:

I think that at least in that aspect unless, like the whole group decides that we're going to swap all of the genders of the actors versus the characters, unless you do that, but that's the decision as a group. If the person is saying like, ‘I really don't want to do this,’ then they don't have to. At least, that's how I am reading the assignment. (Casey, CDT#1)

Later in the same meeting, Casey asserted students “can get out of a lot of things based on a religious issue,” and warned about rejecting religious exemptions from assignments, “because, honestly, it's more an issue of someone being sued” (Casey, CDT#1). For Casey, the team needed to be mindful of the legal ramifications of including queer issues and identities in curriculum.

Is there a basis for Casey’s concerns? To be sure, inclusion of sexuality as part of K-12 instruction has led to legal action against U.S. schools; however, in most cases, pressure exerted by parents and community members on schools and school boards is enough to halt inclusion of materials and activities that are viewed as objectionable. In North Carolina, for example, a third grade teacher came under fire after reading to his students a children’s book entitled, King and King (de Haan & Nijland, 2000), a story about a same-sex royal couple. Parents protested Omar Currie’s decision to read the book and community members brought a challenge to the curriculum review committee (which
they lost). Currie said he felt “intimidated” by administrators, who asked him not to speak publicly about the controversy (Schaub, 2015). He resigned his teaching position. Parents in this case never had to proceed to the courtroom because they asserted their rights as parents within the school to challenge the teacher’s curricular decisions, as well as leveraged legal recourse with the curriculum review committee. Their deeds were enough to push out a queer teacher; cases like this show how teachers must not only mediate issues of sexuality and gender for their students, but also for their communities as well.

Another notorious example of curricular controversy was over President Obama’s September 2009 direct address to the nation’s schoolchildren. Across the country, constituents pressured local school boards not to allow the speech to be broadcast in schools, because some felt it promoted President Obama’s “socialist” agenda (McKinley & Dillon, 2009). The controversy over the President’s speech highlighted the long-standing debate about who controls a child’s education: parents or educators. According to Brown (2009), the Supreme Court case of Wisconsin vs. Yoder in 1972, in which Amish parents were granted exemption from compulsory school attendance, “stands as a significant building block for parents’ constitutional right to direct their children’s education and to control their children’s moral and religious upbringing” (p. 115). At the same time, Brown (2009) concedes, “Parents do not have the right to dictate public schools’ curricula” (p. 120). Rogers (2010) acknowledges that while parents possess no constitutional authority over what is taught in schools, states and local school boards do hold authority over curriculum. State and local policymakers are often very responsive to parent concerns about what is taught in schools, granting families the right to withdraw children from activities they object to, typically dealing with sexuality.
Human sexuality is hotly contested in schools, and states can legislate what can and cannot be taught. For example, until 2013, Colorado had one of the nation’s most restrictive sex education laws (Rogers, 2010), mandating that parents opt in instead of opt out of sex education. In 2013, the Colorado Legislature passed House Bill 13-1081, which changed the opt in clause to opt out, asserting the rights of children in addition to already established parental rights. House Bill 13-1081 (2013) also enumerated resources for educating LBGT youth. In response to that law, Senate Bill 15-077 – “the Parent’s Bill of Rights” – was introduced in the Colorado Legislature in February 2015, with the intention of requiring school districts to develop procedures “by which a parent who objects to any learning material or activity on the basis that it is harmful may withdraw his or her minor child from the activity or from the class or program in which the material is used” (p. 5). Objections, according the bill’s authors, may be based on sex, morality, or religion; in addition, if sexuality will be a topic in any course other than sex education, parents must be provided 15 days notice so that they have time to withdraw their child from the presentation or class. The intention of SB15-077 (2015) mirrors “no promo homo” laws, which are on the books in eight states, in forbidding positive representations of queer identities or issues (Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, n.d.). While the bill did not become law, it adds to legal Discourses about the rights of families to supervise the education of their children. Moreover, legislation like SB15-077 (2015) heightens the sensitivities of educators, administrators, and, in Casey’s example, students, to the concerns of vocal parents regarding sexuality in school curriculum.

While Casey focused on possible legal consequences of queer writing assignments, the other students in the study also articulated an awareness of potentially
negative outcomes resulting from community reservations regarding queer sexuality and
gender nonconformity as a topic in schools. For example, Daisy worried parents would
call the school if students were required to respond to this suggested writing prompt:
“What would you do if you woke up in a world where everyone or most people were gay?
And you were in the straight minority? How would you feel?” (Willow, CDT#3_LA) For
the English language arts group, sexual activity became part of the criteria for deciding if
a resource should be included in the unit of study. Movies, in particular, generated active,
visceral concerns for student participants, because, according to Leah, “In a book it's up
to the imagination” (Leah, CDT#3_LA). And queer sexuality was particularly concerning
while heteronormative sexuality was not, since students recalled seeing a heterosexual
sex scene in Romeo and Juliet (Zeffirelli, 1968) without complaint from parents.
However, two queer-themed movies, Paris is Burning (1990) and Blue is the Warmest
Color (2013), cited by students as effectively addressing themes around identity,
contained non-normative (yet affirming) depictions of sexuality and gender that students
felt would be problematic in the community. Aria pointed out that there was a small
amount of nudity in Paris is Burning (Livingston, 1990) and a large number of sex scenes
in Blue is the Warmest Color (Kechiche, 2013). Students were highly attuned to how
Discourses about sexuality and gender imposed heteronormative limits on the process of
queering curriculum.

The language arts group wondered if the sex scenes could be deleted while still
depicting identity. But Ms. Wright suggested sexuality isn’t easily extricated from
identity: “It seems to me in my experience with people who were uncomfortable with the
homosexuality, it's the sex part. I feel like if part of what we're trying to do is create that
understanding and stuff, not that I would show it in any way, but you know what I mean?” (Ms. Wright, CDT#3_LA) Willow countered by saying straight people “already sexually objectify us, so that's what we're trying to get away from” (Willow, CDT#3_LA). As demonstrated in these narratives, sexuality proved to be a thorny issue for the English language arts group; ultimately, they decided to label resources that contained graphic queer sexuality and let students and parents choose what they would read and/or watch. Daisy noted that homophobic parents would likely block their children from watching or reading anything containing queer sexuality, exercising their legal right to control aspects of their child’s education. Even a handful of parents contesting assignments, which Daisy said was a minority in her community, can influence the education of all children.

The Educational marketplace and choice. Prevalent Discourses around consumer choice also informed how students and teachers talked about curricular options. At Coolidge High School, like schools around the country, choice is increasingly being asserted as a self-evident right of consumers in the educational marketplace. Today, parents shop for schools, and once a school is selected, choice allows students to opt out or opt in when it comes to programs (IB, AP, regular, or remedial tracks), classes (see any high school course catalog), and assignments. Giroux (2012) writes, “Under the current regime of neoliberalism, schools have been transformed into a private right rather than a public good. Students are now being educated to become consumers rather than thoughtful, critical citizens” (para. 6). Student choices satisfy personal preferences rather than foster the attributes needed to become critical participants in a democratic society.

At our first CDT meeting, Aria talked about her experience with Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, in which gender fluidity is central to the plot’s tension and the play’s
humor. She described how boys willingly took on female roles and vice versa. By using the play to focus on gender issues, Aria’s teacher created a climate where students comfortably explored gender roles. But students’ willingness to play against gender could also partly be attributed to the kind of students who opted to take the class in the first place.

Aria: Again, if you don't feel comfortable like that, you don't have to take that class because you know it's in the curriculum. That's another thing to think about.

Kate: If it was like really like that that you were going to deal for someone ... Like I said, most people I feel like would be fine with it because they have another assignment, but if it was that. You can just tell the teacher, “I don't want to do this.”

Aria: Exactly. There’s always another assignment.

Kate: You can write a paper or whatever. Yeah.

Leah: You can opt out of anything, Sex Ed.

Kate: Yeah. Literally you can opt out of anything. People can do PE online. You can pretty much get out of anything. (CDT #1)

Student participants weren’t condoning the opt out mentality; in fact, they lampooned how their peers corrupted the opt out paradigm for online gym credit by taking pictures of themselves five different outfits on one hike so that it looked like they had taken five hikes instead. Students in the study demonstrated how consumer choice trumps ideals of a fit and informed citizenry engaged cooperatively in learning activities.

Because student participants observed that there was a limit to tolerance of queer topics in their classes and a limit to what teachers could or were willing to do, they
exploited the prevailing market logic to describe how they would like to opt into queer-themed courses. Both Leah and Beatrix pined for a class solely devoted to LGBTQ history, given its vast scope and so little time to explore topics in-depth in traditional course formats. Leah took a dim view of the prospects for earnest exploration of queer topics in English language arts classes:

Mike: You don't think there is room, in, like, an eleventh grade literature class, for a unit just on queer literature?
Leah: I don't … I think it could be its own class definitely.
Mike: That people opt into?
Leah: Definitely.
Mike: But not required.
Leah: Not required.
Mike: Okay.
Leah: But I think a diversity section in eleventh grade literature, whatever it is, American lit, I think a diversity option for reading or writing or whatever should be required and I think an LGBTQ book should be included in that section.
Mike: But not as a forced …
Leah: Mm-mmm (negative). I don't think you can force that.
Mike: Okay.
Leah: Yet. (Leah Exit Interview)

To Leah, self-selection and self-sorting, via stacking Queer History or Queer Literature courses with queer students and their allies, seemed to be an acceptable step in having her needs, as a queer student, fulfilled while waiting for the day when queer issues and
identities could infiltrate any classroom. In advocating for choice, student participants negotiated between fear of pushing too hard and a strong desire to educate the ignorant, no matter the consequences. A deeper discussion of the delicate balance between informing and indoctrinating young people will come later in this chapter.

**Modeling as Integral for More Inclusive Writing Assignments**

One issue with choice, according to student participants, was that total freedom to pick writing topics may be too expansive, too daunting, and too confining. Students in the study preferred that teachers model possible topics, including queer topics, as well as mediate how some of those topics might be explored. The idea of modeling surfaced in preliminary interviews, and then gained momentum in Curriculum Design Team meetings, when students counseled teachers to explicitly model queer topics as they explained guidelines for writing assignments. For Casey, the health assignment that she described as “entirely open-ended” was frustrating for her: “We didn’t really go over anything like that (queer topics). He just left us on our own, which frankly was a little annoying. It was that open-ended we weren’t even given any ideas” (Casey, Preliminary Interview). Student participants suggested that purposefully constructed prompts could lead to exploration of queer topics. Daisy reflected on how discussion of a document-based question (DBQ) in her AP History class raised the idea of exploring a queer topic:

In history class we recently did a DBQ on the Renaissance and how men changed with humanistic views. I don't know how that would work but in LA we just did some writing on good versus evil and if that binary of good versus evil has affected our society in a good way or a bad way and a lot of people talked about how homophobes are just bad in general and that's okay for us to say. I thought
that was interesting. I didn't talk about that, I didn't even think about that honestly.

(Daisy Preliminary Interview)

Because queer identities and issues have been erased from classroom Discourses via mandated, heteronormative curricula, students rarely conceive of sexuality and gender as topics for writing, unless the possibility pops up in a class discussion.

At Coolidge, sexuality as a topic in class discussions often occurred randomly and was not purposefully mediated by the teacher. Students in the study felt that teachers needed to assertively advocate for queer topics. In her interview prior to the study, Casey noted that extended essays leave “more room for interpretation, which would be a good time… to put the emphasis on, ‘You can talk about the sexuality of these characters if you want to’ ” (Casey, Preliminary Interview). Given the “heterosexual matrix” (Butler, 1990, p. 6) operating in schools, it might not occur to a student that they could write about a queer topic. When she hosted a “blog carnival” in her Language Arts class, Leah asked her classmates, “What does diversity mean to you?” She said, “I was expecting to get hopefully a few responses of ‘Diversity means where I'm from,’ or ‘Diversity means I have a gay uncle.’ But it was kind of weak. Nobody really opened up too much” (Leah, Student Meeting #1). Many students won’t risk vulnerability in their writing unless the teacher models a tolerant, informed stance regarding queer topics.

Unless a teacher gives students the green light by modeling queer topics, they might opt instead for topics they perceive as more palatable to the teacher and their classmates. The way teachers frame writing prompts sends a message to students not only about what topics are actually on the table, but also how students might think about them.
knowledge through a relationship with more experienced members of their society” (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 52). Without mediation by the teacher, students might not be aware of some of the innumerable options for answering a prompt about diversity. Modeling ideas for responding to a prompt – asking students to consider the sexuality of characters, as Casey suggested – opens up possibilities for student writing. Many teachers fear modeling leads to imitation – that is, copying the model – but when combined with inquiry and experimentation, imitation can lead to something “fundamentally new” (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 209). When students write, they may try out ideas they encountered in class discussions, or follow suggestions made by their teachers, while still incorporating their own creative angle.

The twin concepts of choice and modeling took root in interviews at the onset of this study, sprouted during the student-only meetings, and then became a towering theme in the meetings of the entire Curriculum Design Team. Students in the study both promoted and complicated choice and modeling as they described to teachers how writing assignments should be mediated. The following sections illustrate the evolving perception of choice and modeling in the two meetings I held with students and then the three meetings of the Curriculum Design Team, with students and teachers in dialogue about writing assignments.

**Choice and modeling in student meetings.** Students seized the opportunity to rehearse the concepts of choice and modeling in the first student meeting, which was not part of the agenda I had set for them. In fact, I wasn’t expecting students to generate recommendations for curriculum until they met with Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright. Instead, my intention was to hustle students through a number of activities designed to prepare
them for their meetings with the teachers. In one activity I asked students in the study to write about a time when they tried to share a deeply personal aspect of their identity with another person. One student shared her coming out story. Another student told of living with an eating disorder. I posed a question to students: is there room in the curriculum for deeply personal writing? Four of the students said “yes” and one said “maybe.” After we finished talking about how expressive writing could make queer students feel vulnerable, particularly for students who weren’t out, I began an abrupt transition to Family Feud, a game I adapted from the TV show to inform students about the factors that shape curriculum. But Kate disrupted my agenda and pivoted the conversation toward modeling.

Kate: Can I say one thing about this before we do that?

Mike: Yeah.

Kate: I think that one thing that would maybe make it easier as an assignment is if the sexuality piece was added in in the explanation, but if there was also other things added in. A lot of kids wouldn't have anything to write about sexuality or gender or anything like that.

Leah: They'd write, “I'm straight” and that's it. (Kate, Student Meeting #1)

Kate, who identified as a straight ally, believed that straight students might not consider gender or sexuality as part of their identity, something worth exploring, because gender and sexuality are simply taken for granted. A straight-identifying adolescent male, for example, might have little awareness of how gender and sexuality permeate moments throughout his day. Because of her participation in Gay-Straight Alliance, Kate saw the world through a different lens than her straight peers:
I'm not a traditional, heterosexual Coolidge student. Most kids wouldn't have coming out stories necessarily, so I think that you'd have to explain, or the teacher would have to explain lots of examples and put sexuality and gender and things in that. There'd have to be more to it, I think. (Kate, Student Meeting #1)

Kate thought it was the teacher’s role to show how a prompt might contain more possibilities than appear to the untrained eye of someone who was not an informed and engaged ally like she was. For example, coming-out stories (as Leah pointed out) need not be limited to revealing one’s sexuality. A coming out story could reveal any aspect of identity that a person might hold back from others.

Casey, Kate, and Leah explained that the way in which students in schools take up assignments depends on how expansively the teacher frames the prompt and how liberally the teacher shares examples:

Casey: You could make it, “Talk about a time that you told someone something that you didn't want to tell them about.”

Kate: That was deeply personal.

Casey: Right. Then you could have other examples, like I don't know what, and then have sexuality or things like that as an option, because I know a lot of times teachers will give you, “You could talk about this or that or the other thing or anything else…”

Kate: And it'll spark an idea.

Casey: Right.
Kate: But if you just said, “Write about your sexuality,” or coming-out and sexuality or gender, a lot of people would be like, “Well, I am a boy, and I am straight.”

Leah: It's like, “Done!”

Mike: It's how you frame it or phrase it.

Kate: Right. Exactly.

Offering a list of topics or discussing examples for responding to a writing prompt might seem limiting, but students suggested otherwise.

**Choice and modeling in the first Curriculum Design Team meeting.** About halfway through the first meeting of the Curriculum Design Team, Ms. Wright opened the door for extensive, nuanced dialogue about choice, which led to students strongly advocating for teacher modeling. Both students and teachers had been reflecting on past opportunities in the curriculum to examine queer issues and identities, and students were sharing their frustration at being marginalized by the narrow scope of reading and writing assignments. I prompted Ms. Wright to explain how she framed controversial issues in her classroom, and her answer led to a strong claim about choice: “I think yeah, just building in choice and opportunity where if you are interested in this, if you're willing to explore this and actually, a lot of it comes from other kids and just having that opportunity for kids to say, ‘Hey, you guys should really check out this book or you should really watch this documentary’” (Ms. Wright, CDT#1). Ms. Wright was clearly advocating for choice in this statement; the option she offered for modeling, however, involved students sharing ideas about what to read or what to view. Her statement also suggests that if choice is offered, students might be “willing” to explore queer topics. Ms.
Wright’s statement about choice and modeling, like her “writing invitations,” invited students in the study to explain how choice and modeling are intertwined:

I’ve been thinking that you guys were talking and one thing ... We're all talking about things that are very specifically geared towards these kinds of issues. What I've been thinking up is an easy way for the teachers to work it in without sticking it in their faces is if you're talking about, for example, a persuasive essay. A lot of the teachers will give examples like, “You can do this or you can do that.” Give that as one of the examples. So you aren't saying you have to write about this but it either jogs people's memories or it gives them the idea of, “Oh, maybe I should look into that.” Also, I know that we'll have things where we have to write an essay and we're given three different prompts we could do. (Casey, CDT#1)

Casey laid out two possible approaches to teacher modeling, so that students might choose to write about a queer topic. First, she asserted that a teacher’s examples influence what a student chooses to write about. Even if the topic is wide open, like the health assignment she described, students might become aware of the possibility of a queer topic, if the teacher mentions it as an option. But Casey also offered another approach, suggesting teachers build a queer topic into the options for a writing assignment. If there are three prompts, one option could address queer issues. Offering examples of queer topics or, more explicitly, including a queer-themed option, could raise awareness about non-normative responses to writing prompts.

Aria picked up where Casey left off with a qualification about choice and modeling:
Aria: In my opinion, I think that in order to even put that as an option, and for people to actually choose it, you need to teach it a little bit because the issue that most kids will look at that and say, "I am going to go with...”

Kate: The one that I know.

Aria: “...the one that I know.” I am going to go with that one, because you just don't know. Maybe before doing in unit like that, you might want to show some things so that everybody has opportunity to at least write about something. Nothing is more frustrating than reading something that's written by someone if you have no idea what they are talking about. (CDT#1)

For Aria, mentioning examples is not enough, because “you need to teach it a little bit.” Her point qualified the claim made by Ms. Wright and Casey that offering options is enough, because having the freedom to explore queer topics is not the same as having the capacity to explore queer topics. Modeling must be more extensive than offering a few examples to jog memories, and while some modeling might come from students, direction on what is possible to write also must come from the teacher’s explicit instruction. So that students could venture out of their comfort zone and produce knowledgeable pieces of writing, Aria believed a teacher needs to “show some things” in a unit of study, which could entail sharing queer-themed mentor texts, offering LGBTQ resources outside the history book, or discussing possible queer topics.

After the discussion veered into the merits of history textbooks at Coolidge, Daisy redirected the conversation back to the work of a teacher:

Linking the whole textbook back to the writing prompts. If kids don't have the information, they're not going to write about it. From what I've noticed, what we
talk about and usually like first semester what we did is we would read a book or a few readings if it was a synthesis essay and then, have a Socratic seminar. Then, we would do timed writing. Most people put out their timed writing on what we talked about in the seminar. (Daisy, CDT#1)

Kate concurred, “Right, because that’s what you just talked about and it's easy” (Kate, CDT#1). What makes the assignment “easy” for students is the scaffolding the teacher has done to prepare them to write. By putting students in dialogue with texts and with each other, students are more prepared to write on topics that previously may have been out of reach. Daisy concluded, “If it's not in the reading or if it's not in the discussion, people are not going to write about it unless they are really passionate about the issue. They're not actively going to go out and do that” (Daisy, CDT#1). Students need models that can be imitated and ultimately transformed into their own novel performances. This discussion about choice and modeling in the first meeting of the Curriculum Design Team set the tone for the second and third meetings, in which students continued to advocate for choice and modeling.

**Choice and modeling in social studies.** Casey was the social studies group’s most vocal proponent for choice and modeling. During the second CDT meeting, as the tea party project was beginning to crystallize, Mr. Jones was exploring cues given by students during the first meeting about choice and modeling. The goal was to hold a tea part, in which students would drink tea and enact the roles of historical figures. The social studies group promoted a research component, so that history students would have to provide a credible historical basis for their performance, particularly in articulating the views of the historical figure. While the research topic could be “broad,” Mr. Jones
articulated a desire to model possible topics for students: “If I decided to give examples, I could show a few examples of people, whether it be historically or with human rights, or with even athletics, and how things changed because of what that person did, and then doing the research surrounding it, and being able to explain and argue why this person changed the world” (Mr. Jones, CDT#2_SS). Casey’s response recognized the omission of queer people as Mr. Jones verbally processed the assignment, and so she attempted to lead him toward more explicit modeling of queer topics.

Yeah, I think that the big thing, at this point, is since we can't force anyone to write about LGBT issues, because that will run into problems. I think it's mostly just giving those examples. When you're suggesting a project, being like: “Hey, you can do this, or you can do this, or you know, you can do the thing with the gays and stuff.” (Casey, CDT#2_SS)

The way Casey said “the gays and stuff” – sly and sarcastic – elicited laughter from Kate and Mr. Jones, causing Casey to repeat the line: “Hey, you can do the thing with the gays and stuff!” When Mr. Jones laughed again, Casey punctuated her claim by saying, “Exactly that,” as in, *you can perform it like that or you should say exactly those words.* Kate picked up Casey’s point for more emphasis, with Mr. Jones hearing the case the students were making to him:

Kate: Yeah, definitely, I think that examples actually from teachers. I think that sometimes teachers – I don’t know if you do this – teachers don't know how big of an impact examples really have.

Mr. Jones: Yeah.

Beatrix: Oh my God!
Casey: Yeah, examples are a big thing.

Kate: If the teacher tells you how to do something, and even if you understand...

Casey: You don't want to do something different, because they've already told you how to do this.

Mr. Jones: Right.

Casey: So you might as well do that.

Kate: Right, and if they tell you one way, and if you have no idea how to do it, and then they tell you one way that would be correct, then automatically you're just like: “Oh! I could do it on this person.” So if that was an option, then you'd go: “Oh! I can do something about gay rights, or I can do something with this.”

When Beatrix reframed the research paper idea so that students would assume a historical identity, she reiterated the point once again, suggesting that a student might select a queer historical figure or choose to examine how a historical figure might view gay rights, opening the door to performances that historically have been erased from literacy activities. At that point, Mr. Jones rejoined the dialogue, wondering what a historical figure might think about current state and federal court cases regarding gay marriage. Mr. Jones heeded the students’ call for both choice and modeling, which influenced the development of the tea party project in the social studies group.

As their discussion continued over two meetings, the social studies group envisioned a writing assignment (see Appendix E) where history students would produce a research paper on a historical figure from the American Civil Rights movement. Students would be able to choose a leader to investigate, focusing on their ideology,
actions, and impact. The culminating activity would be a tea party, in which students enacted their characters as they discussed current issues, such as the minimum wage or gay marriage. The research paper was intended to prepare students to discuss current events in character as credibly as possible. Students would infer from their research how Civil Rights leaders might react to current issues, not offer their own viewpoint. In addition to Selma and the March on Washington, D.C., students would study Stonewall, ACT UP, and other key organizations, events, and figures in the gay rights movement. By expanding primary and secondary resources to include the gay rights movement, the social studies group hoped more students would take up queer issues and identities in their writing.

**Choice and modeling in language arts.** Choice immediately took center stage as the language arts group met during the second Curriculum Design Team meeting. Aria initially proposed a joint social studies and language arts writing project that focused on civil rights for all: “Instead of saying, ‘We’re going to talk about gay rights this unit,’ you talk about all rights, but you give that option” (CDT#2_LA). Following her advice, the group went right into types of texts for the unit. Leah said the unit could begin with a book. Willow suggested learning from a documentary. Daisy recommended using a collection of essays. Ms. Wright wondered about the direction of the unit: “Are you talking about civil rights? Are you talking about LGBTQ issues?” And then she added, “I’m going to throw a bunch of poems and articles and things at you about gay rights?” (Ms. Wright, CDT#2_LA). This question provoked students to consider not only what kind of unit they would like to see taught, but also how the unit should be taught. After Leah talked about *Luna* (2004), a young adult novel that describes the tumultuous process
of a teen transitioning from male to female, Willow decided, “We want to focus on identity instead of rights” (Willow, CDT#2_LA). From that point, the theme of the unit was clear, so that student participants were able to spend their remaining time describing possible resources, genres, instructional approaches, and conceptual frameworks to build a unit on identity.

Before the language arts group could get on track with generating resources for the identity unit, Aria described an HIV advertising campaign that made a strong impression on her. Called Real Men Revealed (2014), the ads featured drag queens from RuPaul’s Drag Race as well as a New York City firefighter removing articles of clothing while describing the need for conversation about HIV. Aria made a connection between the ads and the vulnerability she felt as a writer in school:

As they talk about their lives, and peel all their clothing and they're pretty much naked by the end and then they're like, “And now I've shown you who I am and I'm confronting this with you, full frontal, and this is what it is.” I feel that way in my writing class, there's a stigma that it's really difficult to write about gay issues and there's a stigma like there was many years ago about how you can't write about black issues and things like that. To make it a safe place and comfortable for the students to even explore that area, as the teacher, you have to introduce it in a way that’s not scary and you have to know what you're talking about and that will make the big difference. (Aria, CDT#2_LA)

Later, after much discussion about queer-themed texts to include as options in the unit, Ms. Wright acknowledged Aria’s point. Trying to narrow the ideas generated down to a specific, concrete writing assignment, Ms. Wright developed the following prompt: “I am
a person and I happen to be __________” (Ms. Wright, CDT#2_LA). “Just let them run with it,” Ms. Wright said. “That could be anything. That idea, it's so open anyway. If your teacher has done a good job of giving you sources that cover these documentaries, these movies, these books, as well as ones for different racial issues, gender issues, things like that. Cultural issues. Everybody has something to write on there, right?” (Ms. Wright, CDT#2_LA). For Ms. Wright, the teacher has done a “good job” if they offer an array of resources, including queer-themed texts. While she didn’t address Aria’s criteria of classroom affect or teacher knowledge, Ms. Wright recognized that the set of diverse texts mentioned by student participants not only cover multiple identities from different cultures, and not only provide options for students to explore identity, but also serves as a mediating authority when the teacher cannot, a theme that participants returned to throughout the study.

The English language arts group produced a writing assignment (see Appendix D) that captured voice and explored identity. The genre could be personal narrative, poetry, a letter, or something else. Activities included a number of writing prompts designed to get students thinking about their own identities as well as build empathy for the identities of others. The writing assignment included the possibility of exploring queer identities, but looked at identity through a broader lens, such as how media and pop culture construct identity, or how labels shape who we are. To inform the development of the writing assignment, students would not only respond to a number of prompts, but could also read and view numerous non-traditional or unconventional texts, paired with canonical course texts. The language arts group envisioned their writing assignment unfolding over time,
embedded in existing units of study, but adding texts and prompts as a way to queer the curriculum.

**Finessing Choice and Modeling: Student and Teacher Perspectives**

Students viewed queer issues and identities in the curriculum as necessary to raising visibility, but also anticipated during discussions the numerous ways a more inclusive curriculum could be problematic. The tandem of choice and modeling offered potential for queering the curriculum, but needed to be finessed in ways that mitigated issues around teacher efficacy and expertise. In offering students opportunities to consume and produce queer texts, participants strategized how teachers could also prevent accusations of indoctrination into the “gay lifestyle.” Participants also discussed the possibility that some students might exhibit intolerance or ignorance when presented with options to read or write about queer themes. To that end, students collaborated with teachers to develop strategies to mediate Discourses about gender and sexuality, both inside and outside the classroom.

**Stepping outside school-sanctioned texts.** Students in the study described how they were often asked by teachers to write about what they had read. In AP U.S. History class, for example, students practiced document-based questions (DBQ’s) before taking the AP exam. A DBQ asks students read and analyze treaties, manifestos, speeches, graphs, maps, etc. before writing an essay in response to a prompt. Leah, Beatrix, and Casey portrayed DBQ’s as “factual” (Student Meeting #1). Beatrix said that what you wrote in response to the prompt “all depends on what documents you are using” (Beatrix, Student Meeting #1). Because of the seemingly objective nature of the task, Casey stated, “There’s less room to be biased against anyone” when responding to a DBQ (Casey,
Student Meeting #1). I asked students if the selection of “safe” documents, like King’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” (1963) might steer responses away from controversial issues like gay rights. What about using a manifesto from ACT Up or Queer Nation in a DBQ, I wondered. Both Aria and Beatrix felt it would be 20 to 30 years before DBQ’s incorporated documents like that. Later, in our first Curriculum Design Team meeting, Aria explained how she wanted to trace slow approval by the FDA in the 1980’s of AZT (an antiretroviral drug used to treat HIV), all the way back to regulations initiated by the Progressives in the early 20th century. “I really wanted to write about that,” Aria said. But because the textbook lacked information about the AIDS crisis, she said, “I never got the opportunity” (Aria, CDT Meeting #1). Regarding the narrow band of texts in U.S. History classes, Daisy asserted, “If kids don’t have the information (about queer issues), they’re not going to write about it” (Daisy, CDT Meeting #1). Texts offer students a way to envision a range of possible performances.

In English classes, analysis of texts was also a common writing task for students at Coolidge, whether they were placed in AP, IB, or regular tracks. For these assignments, students were expected to produce literary analyses about novels or poems or plays as a summative assessment for a literature unit, and draw from texts for information to produce expository or persuasive texts (such as examining authors from the Transcendentalist literary period). Casey believed that reading about queer characters could lead to the option of writing about queer characters:

In LA (language arts) if you have a book that has a character that is LGBTQ you could have a writing assignment that’s a discussion about that, or at least have that as an option. I know that a lot of times with writing assignments, especially
timed writing, we’re given three prompts and you have to pick from one. Have one of the three prompts be like, “Discuss the characters’ sexuality or gender identity and how it affects them in the novel,” or anything like that or work in themes there, whatever the teacher wants to do. (Casey, Preliminary Interview)

Ms. Wright acknowledged the role of literature in an interview prior to the meetings: “I’m thinking that right now so much of the writing we do is dictated by the literature. So if the literature dealt with more of those issues, of course, the writing would, too” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview). Students’ written performances, in effect, are mediated by what they read (and view).

While the literary canon is well-represented at Coolidge High School, language arts teachers also offer students options for reading, mostly in terms of novels. Ms. Wright’s senior literature class exercised choice in novels: “I gave them a couple of choices of books that have some literary merit, where I knew they’d actually have material to work with as far as meat for their analysis” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview). Although the novels offered by Ms. Wright did not address queer issues, the activity demonstrated how flexibility is already present in the curriculum to include a broader range of texts. If, as in Ms. Wright’s class, a novel outside of the canon contains certain literary devices, it can do the work of a canonical text so that students can, for example, examine symbolism in a choice novel with queer themes or characters as readily as they can with a canonical text.

During the meetings with teachers, there was strong consensus among students about integrating queer texts and assignments into existing units of study, rather than developing a separate “Queer Literature” unit in language arts or “Gay Rights” unit in
history class. According to student participants, changes to the curriculum should be about adding, not subtracting, so that students can read a queer-themed novel like *Will Grayson, Will Grayson* (Green & Levithan, 2011) in addition to *Angela’s Ashes* (McCourt, 1996) and *Black Boy* (Wright, 1944). Prior to the study, Ms. Wright acknowledged the possibility of modeling queer-themed texts when she reflected on how she structured choice in her classes: “My senior literature class, they do a lot of choice reading, and so there are things that I could do to probably say, ‘Here’s a book about a lesbian couple or a gay couple or things like that.’ Just within the normal book talks” (Ms. Wright, Preliminary Interview). For Ms. Wright, participating in the study with students elevated this notion of expanding course texts beyond the literary canon to include texts with queer performances for students to examine and imitate.

Each student in the study – without exception – viewed texts as the primary way into learning about and writing about queer issues and identities. During the two meetings of the language arts and social studies groups, students wanted to devote extensive time to discussing resources for the writing assignments. Resources included blogs, movies, commercials, TV shows, poems, plays, websites, novels, essays, documentary films, online videos, TedTalks, and stand up comedy. Student participants were excited to share their boundless knowledge with Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright, to educate them about ways the curriculum might move beyond the history textbook or the literary anthology to include queer-themed texts. Each text linked to the idea of rights (social studies) and identity (language arts), serving as a source of information for the teacher as well as inspiration and information for students who might choose to write about a queer topic for a class assignment.
For student participants, reading and writing are closely linked. Providing a wide array of texts for students to choose from and offering options for prompts represented the foundation of the writing assignments developed by the social studies and language arts groups. In reflecting on the work of the English language arts group in an interview after the study, Leah noted:

We talked about the method of choice, really, giving students a choice of (what) they were going to read. We have, like, a diversity topic or lesson where we give them a choice to read Black Boy or Luna or different books about different cultures that are different from their own, or maybe similar, but giving them that option that they don't have to learn about LGBT studies but giving them the opportunity to… write about LGBT topics. (Leah, Exit Interview)

For students in the study, offering a more expansive set of choices for books to read and topics to write about was the preferred method of queering the curriculum, in combination with sensitive and informed modeling by the teacher.

**Plotting a course between ignorance and indoctrination.** What happens when offering choice doesn’t yield exploration of queer identities and issues? How much modeling can occur before teachers risk accusations of gay brainwashing? Participants explored these tensions during CDT meetings, sometimes in contradictory ways. Among students in the study, there was concern about pressing too hard for queer visibility; at the same time, students resented the lack of representation of queer issues and identities in curriculum. During the first CDT meeting, when sticky issues of intolerance and indoctrination were investigated by the team, Aria maintained educators shouldn’t always worry about alienating their straight students or community members, because teachers
don’t often worry about alienating queer students. “You have to think about that one assignment versus a hundred assignments that the other side has experienced,” she said. “I think it's okay for them to feel uncomfortable and question for once” (Aria, CDT Meeting #1).

Willow was bothered by the idea that choice might enable students to avoid challenging topics. “That begs the question that I would like to extend,” she said. “Should we tolerate intolerance?” (Willow, CDT Meeting #1). She supposed everyone in a classroom – queer or straight – is made uncomfortable when course content turns to issues like race, gender, sexuality, or disability. But Willow continued, “We don’t necessarily need to tolerate that intolerance, and it could be a good thing to even open people's minds if it’s done in a classroom setting where it’s mediated by a teacher” (CDT #1). For Willow, a teacher is an expert not just in content, but also in practice. Mediation of content is a long-standing teaching practice. Beatrix cited an example without teacher mediation, where choice was met with apathy in regard to exploring queer issues:

We did Romeo and Juliet last year and we were supposed to tackle an issue that is going on currently and I wanted to do LGBTQ issues and my group was like, “We should just go at something easy.” I was like, “No, we should do this because this is important.” Then, what I found difficult was like, people don't actually care. They are like, “I am not homophobic but I don't care.” (Beatrix, CDT#1)

When students opt out of exploring queer themes because of ignorance, apathy, religious objections, or consumer preferences, participants in the study proposed the teacher adopt a stronger stance; however, members of the Curriculum Design Team wrestled with how
Leah wondered about a teacher’s power to mediate highly charged topics. She compared requiring students to offer an opinion about an LGBTQ topic to requiring students to offer an opinion about circus (a prompt she encountered in middle school): “It will be like, ‘What is your opinion on circuses?’ I would be like, ‘They're awful.’ Most people wouldn't be like, ‘Oh, my family owns a circus, I don't want to write about this’ ” (Leah, CDT#1). Leah’s point is that no young person is going to be devastated if she hears a classmate promote or condemn circuses, because it’s largely an abstract argument. No one in the classroom will likely be in the circus business. But, if a student condemns another student’s sexuality in response to a teacher-directed prompt, or if a student questions another student’s family-held values about sin, then the classroom dynamic becomes much more complicated, much more personal. Someone is offended.

Students in the study wondered if teachers could ably mediate dialogue around queer issues and identities, both inside and outside their classrooms.

Students and teachers in the study collaborated to think of ways to strategically develop writing assignments, so that queer identities and issues could be affirmed and explored by all students. The way assignments and activities are framed by the teacher is instrumental to how students receive them. Ms. Wright explained,

There are ways, I think, that you can have these conversations without saying, “We're going to talk about LGBTQ rights today,” but it's, “Today, we're going to talk about people who don't have a voice, maybe, at certain points.” And kind of look at the issue. Then, give that as the place to have those conversations. (Ms. Wright, CDT#1)
Teachers can couch queer identities among many identities, or LGBTQ rights among the rights of many oppressed groups. In addition, teachers can offer information as factual, seemingly without judgment. According to Kate, for example, the AIDS movement “is historical. It's not like making an argument that LGBTQ is good or bad. It's just a historical fact” (Kate, CDT#1). For Beatrix, even a toss-away line in her history book acknowledged her existence in a seemingly factual way: “Well, it's like I am reading… and (the authors) are like, ‘Oh, yeah. Greenwich Village was really famous for having a bunch of lesbians living there.’ I was like, “Okay. I didn't know that’” (Beatrix, CDT#1).

Although the act of including queer issues and queer texts in the curriculum is political, a teacher’s approach to queer issues and texts matters to students and parents, and students in the study were particularly attuned to what the teacher did, preferring a less overt and more nuanced approach.

Daisy’s framing of queer curriculum, in particular, was nuanced but also subtly disruptive. For her, choice of texts to read wouldn’t isolate students in silos of their own beliefs:

I think it would be better for either people to read a lot of small stuff or for each person or certain groups of people to read different books or something, because then when the class comes together to talk about it, you can get lots of different perspectives, because even if you just have one perspective of Luna, for example, that’s great, but I think it drives the point home if there's lots of different examples with lots of different identities, as well. (Daisy, CDT#2/ELA)

Students might read a wide range of texts in a unit of study, perhaps in addition to a common text. But, according to Daisy, through classroom dialogue, “People still get the
information, even if they don't feel like they want to read the text” (Daisy, CDT#2_LA). Even as teachers offer choice, students will be exposed to multiple perspectives through activities such as class discussions. Options in reading and writing may give parents and students the illusion of avoiding troubling topics, but participants in the study carefully constructed their writing assignments so that options in reading and writing resulted in an exchange of ideas throughout the unit of study.

Finally, it’s important to note that, while choice is evident in the writing assignments created collaboratively by students and teachers, modeling is not explicitly mentioned in documents generated by the social studies and language arts groups. Choice is more apparent in the writing assignment artifacts because students listed a number of resources as well as framed the assignments, including prompts, in ways that encouraged choice of topics and texts. (The mention by teachers of queer texts and topics as options for writing assignments could, however, be construed as a form of modeling.) Explicit directions for modeling weren’t included in the writing assignments; instead, students provided oral instructions for teachers as they created the writing assignments together. While I used curricular artifacts as a way to triangulate with meeting and interview transcripts, I don’t believe the omission of modeling in the curriculum documents serves as disconfirming evidence. Rather, the omission is more likely due to the lack of a prompt dealing with instructional practices on the list of questions I asked groups to think about as they constructed their writing assignments. Modeling, in tandem with choice, was clearly an instructional requirement for students as they envisioned more inclusive writing assignments. Teacher takeaways, rather than curricular documents, served as a better indicator of students’ advocacy for choice and modeling as instructional practices.
Teacher Takeaways: “Now You Can Write about It”

When I conducted interviews with Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones at the end of the study, they were able to articulate the value that students placed on choice and modeling. Both teachers heard student participants when they said they wanted options for writing assignments. “In terms of the writing and LGBTQ issues in writing,” Ms. Wright concluded, “One of things I learned is that it is easy… to have open prompts that allow kids to write about anything, and if they wanted identity or LGBTQ issues, it can be (an option)” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). Mr. Jones vowed to offer a writing assignment in his history class would be “all-encompassing” so that students could “feel out where they want to go with it” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). At the end of the study, he viewed writing assignments as an “outlet,” where a student “might be writing a paper about someone who interests you or an issue that interests you” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). Ms. Wright acknowledged that she had the power to “give a space for the kids who need to talk about it (queer issues and identities)” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). “I think I will be way conscientious about how open my prompts are, and I think as far as I already do give examples about you could write about this and that,” she said. “I will just be more conscientious about throwing in like, ‘You could write about identity or you could write about being queer’” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). Both teachers clearly articulated the desire of students to offer choice and provide models for writing assignments.

The idea of providing options and models to explore identities through writing was so captivating to Ms. Wright that she introduced an open-ended prompt soon after our second CDT meeting.
In couple of my classes, and the day our small group first met they came up with this question or this prompt that says, “I am a person and I also happen to be ________.” We actually took that to my three senior classes. The first period Leah introduced it, almost every single kid wrote about it. When she introduced it, she filled in the blank with a bunch of different examples. “I am a person and I also happen to be a woman.” “I am a person and I also happen to be African-American.” “I am a woman and I also happen to be a lesbian.” “I am a person and I also happen to…” and she gave a ton of different examples, and I feel like that quick little example of that as an option was enough. I do not know. I have not received them; they have the option to turn them in at the end of the semester if they want to, and I know some are going to do that one for theirs. I know some kids were writing about their identity within their families. Some kids were writing about their identity within the social community of Coolidge. They wrote: “I am a nerd.” “I am a gamer.” “I am the smart kid.” Things like that. I do not know how many wrote on LGBTQ issues but I think… it was clear that that was an option if you wanted to. (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview)

Ms. Wright described the assignment as both generative and inclusive, due to the open-ended nature of the prompt, but also due to the examples Leah modeled for her peers, which made it clear to students they could explore and enact queer issues and identities through their written work.

Mr. Jones also seized on the idea of providing examples for students as they pondered writing assignments, particularly examples that open the door to exploring queer identities and issues.
I know the examples, when giving assignments, giving the LGBTQ students that opportunity to see an example of LGBTQ issues. That really stood out because I don’t think I’ve ever done that in a class – and not purposefully – just something that I just didn’t really think about. Now, it’s like, yeah, why wouldn’t you do that? You give examples for other social groups, why would you give the examples for that? That was one that really stood out: sometimes they feel like their voices are shut off because an example isn’t given. (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview)

Both Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright envisioned choice and modeling as tools that were relatively easy to employ in combating curricular erasure and opening space for performances that might raise queer visibility in literacy classrooms.

Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones were also sold on the idea of incorporating diverse resources in their classrooms. For Mr. Jones, the Civil Rights Movement would still focus on the rights of African-Americans, but he would note that one of Martin Luther King’s chief strategists was Bayard Rustin, a gay black man. And he intended to highlight other movements within the Civil Rights movement, introducing students to Stonewall and Harvey Milk. To become better informed about the LGBTQ rights movement, Mr. Jones intended to spend time during his summer break investigating books and documentaries suggested to him by students. By the time I interviewed her, Ms. Wright had already watched a number of documentaries students recommended, such as *Bridegroom* (Thomason-Bloodworth, 2013), which depicted a gay man who was unable to properly grieve his partner’s death because the family and the state did not recognize his right to
do so. As Ms. Wright was sifting through the recommendations her students provided, she began to understand how these non-canonical texts could support her curriculum:

I have existing curriculum as far as understanding literature or rhetoric or modes of writing, and I teach that through different texts. Why not bring some of this stuff in as another text option? For me what it is, it is just, it is another eye opening, right? Oh, why not, why would we not read a text about this or watch a documentary about this? It is not a question of teaching about homosexuality. It is about bringing in text that have that perspective that will fit with the curriculum I have, which I think is an easy thing to do. (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview)

For Ms. Wright, the resources cited by students in the study weren’t about promoting an “everyone needs to be accepting of homosexuality” mandate (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview); instead, the resources had curricular worth, like any other text she had previously shared with her students.

Both Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones perceived a need to preview resources, not only to aid in making decisions about what to incorporate into their curriculum, but also to get to know their queer students better. Ms. Wright described the literature students recommended as “unfamiliar,” confessing, “I would love to be in a place to say, ‘Hey check out this one. It deals with X, Y and Z’” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). The resource riffing was intense for Mr. Jones during his meetings with the social studies group: “Our students were, ‘Oh, I’ve got this and this and this!’ It’s like, ‘Oh, let me have some of it’” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). After delving into resources during his summer break, his goal was “changing a lot of what I do with U.S. History,” especially the Civil Rights unit, so that queer students have “the opportunity to learn about people, places, things that they
have a passion for” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). For Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright, resources suggested by students in the study had the potential to inform curriculum as well as inform teachers about the needs and interests of their queer students.

**Student Reflections: “Build Something Better”**

In interviews held after our Curriculum Design Team meetings concluded, students in the study identified dialogue about curriculum design as a memorable aspect of their participation in the study, because they did not realize the variety of factors that contributed to what teachers implemented in class. Aria described the tension between a teacher’s “liberty” to design curriculum and curricular requirements the teacher needed to fulfill (Aria, Exit Interview). To Willow, teachers talking “about their own freedom and what limited them in curriculum was also really interesting to me, because I never knew about that” (Willow, Exit Interview). Student participants gained some clarity about how texts with transgender themes or characters, for example, might find their way into the curriculum, something they persistently advocated for. Students also expressed an appreciation for the willingness of Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright to address student needs, in spite of pressures to cover mandated material.

While students contributed numerous resources to each writing assignment, they also emphasized the need to assimilate queer issues and identities into existing units of study. Neither the social studies group nor the English language arts group envisioned a queer unit of study, separate from other units. For Willow, using identity as an overarching theme was a means for the English language arts group to “tap into the curriculum” that was already in place (Willow, Exit Interview). The social studies group merely wished for the gay rights movement to take its rightful place alongside other
movements during the Civil Rights era. Choice and modeling were positioned as tools the teacher could use to cultivate critical perspectives, a way to untether the school from powerful heteronormative Discourses while inspiring students to consider queer issues and identities in their writing assignments.

Students were not only able to deliver resources teachers had never heard of, but also remind teachers of useful pedagogical practices. Choice, according to Daisy, fosters “creative freedom” (Daisy, Exit Interview). Casey felt teachers could use modeling to make writing assignments “a lot more inclusive” (Casey, Exit Interview). While students referenced modeling and choice in exit interviews, they mostly talked about their enthusiasm for the sharing of expertise on a wide range of topics and issues among teachers and students. Willow summarized a key theme from the exit interviews of students when she said, “What I think is really cool is that we were able to combine… the students’ knowledge of maybe more LGBTQ issues, and then the teacher’s knowledge of curriculum and teaching, and then that kind of came together” (Willow, Exit Interview). Aria echoed the generative nature of the meetings:

Then also, just we bring them an idea, and then someone else might have another view of it that would be really interesting, because then we'd think, “Okay, maybe not, maybe this way.” So the more and more opinions from each student, I think that helped build something better. (Aria, Exit Interview)

Meeting dynamics will be explored in much more detail in the following chapter, but it is important to note that students felt better, more inclusive writing assignments materialized as a result of teachers and students working together to foster visibility and accessibility of non-normative performances of gender and sexuality.
Chapter Conclusion

Students acknowledged a dearth of opportunities to study queer history, read about queer identities in literature, or produce queer-themed compositions at Coolidge. As a possible remedy, students collaborated with teachers to develop writing assignments that utilized choice to explore rights and identities as major themes in history and language arts, respectively. Modeling was emphasized as an instructional practice for teachers to employ so that choice did not seem daunting and did not engender bigotry. Student advocacy for choice paired with modeling reflects sound instructional practice: the findings of 1998 study of writing assignments in 61 classrooms by the Educational Testing Service and the National Assessment of Education Progress concurs with students in the study, saying teachers need to strike a balance between boundless choice and no choice at all (as cited in National Writing Project & Nagin, 2006, p. 48).

According to student participants from Coolidge, choice should not exclude examples, but instead show young people that exploring queer identities and issues is both possible and safe.

Students positioned choice as a means for teachers to mediate potentially oppressive community Discourses. Censorship can have a chilling effect on curricular decision-making, with teachers wondering, do we want that kind of controversy? In a study of a Midwestern high school’s adoption of a multicultural course designed to foster “open-minded interest” in other cultures, DiPardo and Fehn (2000) found “touchy issues were silenced” (p. 187) in the curriculum. A Multicultural Advisory Council, consisting of school staff and community members, flagged controversial issues in multicultural curriculum. Through their participation on the council, teachers in the DiPardo and Fehn
study detected controversial issues and responded by elevating themes of “celebration and tolerance” (p. 188) rather than power and privilege. Given the community’s blindness about its own issues of bigotry and inequity, DiPardo and Fehn write, “It should be seen as little wonder that the course was marked by a pervasive search for safe ground, a consistent quieting of matters that might provoke further waves of complaint” (p. 188). Teachers in any school are attuned to community Discourses and to consequences of their curricular decisions, and they subsequently shape curriculum in ways that avoid unwanted attention from community members who may be inclined to seek redress not only at school board meetings and in the media, but also in courtrooms. According to students in the study, choice gives teachers the ability to circumvent legal landmines, so that educators are able to announce to their students, “I’m not saying you have to read Parrotfish (Wittlinger, 2007), but if you want to read an amazing novel and learn about transgender youth, then it’s an option for you.”

By exercising choice, however, students sometimes avoid the possibility of intellectual discomfort as part of their educational experience, a condition bemoaned by Halberstam in a 2015 presentation about triggering. Halberstam (2015) wondered how teachers can stage “intellectual adventures” for their “clients and customers” while fretting over the possibility of causing someone discomfort by triggering memories of trauma. Halberstam (2015) stated that “structures of knowing” have been overtaken by “our own private systems of pain and pleasure.” In offering trigger warnings, teachers deflate any sense of adventure; in striving for safe space, teachers self-censor. In the introduction to Halberstam’s presentation, Miller (2015) told the audience that these “superficial proxies” often obscure “deeper problems… regarding diversity, equity, and
the neo-corporatization of education.” As for the clients of the school marketplace, students are empowered to opt out of assignments or classes that challenge and opt into classes that affirm their belief systems and their identities. While tracking has been a part of the high school fabric for a long time, the culture wars, individualized instruction, and helicopter parents have created a situation in schools where students are shielded from controversy by always having an alternative text/course/assignment provided for them. Students in this study complicated choice, insisting that choice be paired with teacher modeling, so that intellectual discomfort translated into learning for ALL students.

By addressing the research question about how members of the curriculum design team understood the role of high school writing assignments in contributing to the construction and performance of gender and sexuality, this chapter’s findings show that students wished for teacher-mediated opportunities to explore non-normative performances. Students both advocated for and problematized choice and modeling as a way to prepare teachers to incorporate queer issues and identities into their content areas. In addition, students elevated unsanctioned school texts, such as documentaries, young adult novels, nonfiction texts, blogs, and TV shows as alternatives to the literary canon and the ubiquitous history book. Evident in this chapter is student sensitivity to dominant Discourses as well as a willingness to disrupt them, which is a topic explored in greater detail in the next chapter. Also evident in this chapter are the dynamics among teachers and students as they collaborated to make writing assignments more inclusive, a collaborative performance that fostered local agency in an age of top-down reforms. None of the students in the study were hesitant in sharing their insights about curriculum, a dynamic that I will describe in the next chapter. In the spring 2015 the perspectives of
queer youth, as well as the queer perspectives of youth, helped teachers to produce writing assignments for their content areas that were different, disruptive, even queer.
Results: Queer Sensibility for the Straight Curriculum

This would be really fun to do. –Mr. Jones

Introduction

Students in the study brought a queer sensibility to the meetings of the Curriculum Design Team. Michael Bronski, author of *A Queer History of the United States* (2011), defines queer sensibility as “a sensibility that would be from the outside” (Voos, 2012; italics original). Because queer perspectives and youth perspectives are rarely part of the curriculum development process, contributions from student participants – primarily their knowledge of marginalized Discourses – were conveyed to teachers from the outside in. Traditional roles were upended: students shed the role of curriculum recipient (outsider) and embraced the role of curriculum developer (insider). Teachers in the study – Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones – toggled between expert and novice as they worked with student participants who were better informed about queer narratives and issues. Paraphrasing Gertrude Stein, Morris (1998) says a queer sensibility makes “the familiar become strange” (in Pinar, p. 275). The discursive status teachers enjoy as educational experts is directly tied to their proficiency with dominant Discourses, which schools normatively reproduce (Gee, 2012; Heath, 1985). However, different Discourses surfaced when students joined the process of developing curriculum. For teachers, generally awash in familiar Discourses about curriculum, having students articulate their impressions of writing assignments – as experienced and envisioned – made curriculum strange, or queer.

Because of the participation of students and teachers on Curriculum Design Team meetings, a queer sensibility was discursively constituted as part of the curriculum
development process during this study. Teachers typically don’t discuss curriculum development with students, and the Discourses that engage queer students outside of the school day typically don’t appear in school curriculum. This chapter portrays queer sensibility in a few important ways. First, I examine meeting dynamics through the lens of power relations. As one way to appraise how power circulates through discursive spaces like Curriculum Design Team meetings, I chart conversational turns and describe the roles taken by participants. I also analyze how students employed language with a queer sensibility, comparing mediation performed by student participants during meetings to mediation performed by teachers in the classroom. In addition, I explore students’ use of humor in meetings as a tactic to contest power. Second, I describe how students shared their sensibilities as recipients of curriculum, which is not a practice generally found in schools. Students in this study focused on more concrete aspects of planning, rather than big picture elements, like state content standards. And third, I explain how students disrupted conceptions of writing assignments, specifically via Discourses they embraced, promoted, and critiqued. Later in this chapter, I trace a few key Discourses – cited by student participants during the study – to their roots in unsanctioned, out-of-school texts. This chapter, then, explores how students brought a queer sensibility to normative Discourses, particularly in relation to literacy activities, and describes non-normative conceptions of Discourses that students in this study convey to teachers from outside in (i.e. outside of school curriculum, or outside a teacher’s experience). Using performances of queer sensibility as a lens, this chapter addresses the research question, *What Discourses and identities emerge as participants collaborate to develop writing assignments that explore gender and sexuality?*
Meeting Dynamics

Prior to Curriculum Design Team meetings, students had established discursive solidarity (Gee, 2012) among themselves, largely due to the time they spent together during their weekly G.S.A. meetings. For example, when I asked students to create meeting norms (without Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright in attendance), they felt the exercise was unnecessary. Following my instructions, Daisy suggested a norm for the group: “Just be respectful. Don’t insult other people’s opinions.” But then she noted, “I doubt we have a lot of different opinions” (Daisy, Student Meeting #2). When I made the observation that the previous week’s conversation was collegial, students confirmed that a strong bond already existed among them.

Casey: I think we all get along pretty well.

Beatrix: We do this a lot in G.S.A.!

Casey: We all know each other and none of our personalities clash.

Daisy: We have the same political (views) as far as gay stuff. (Student Meeting #2)

Because their solidarity became apparent to me after this exchange, I ended the norms activity. Solidarity did not necessarily extend to the participating teachers, since none of the students had taken a class with Mr. Jones and only Aria, Leah, and Daisy had enrolled in a class with Ms. Wright. Solidarity may be one reason Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones described students as “comfortable” during meetings (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview; Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). Their level of comfort can also be attributed to their expertise in queer issues, which was evident in the linguistic moves they modeled for teachers.

Evidence of students’ expertise, as well as their level of comfort, can be also understood
via the conversational turns taken by participants, as well as the roles they performed during Curriculum Design Team meetings. Finally, students’ liberal use of humor created a fun and even subversive atmosphere for curriculum development. In the spring of 2014, students and teachers upended traditional power dynamics to invite marginalized Discourses into conversations about inclusive writing assignments.

**Turn taking.** The number of turns taken by the teachers and students reflected the roles they occupied in the meetings (see Table 10). The average of all teacher turns (divided by two participants) was exactly equal to the average for all student turns (divided seven participants): 266. However, the total number of turns for teachers, 533, was far exceeded by the total number of turns for students, 1860. While it’s sensible to deduce that a greater number of students would yield more turns, it’s also important to note that students took their turns. They asserted power in speaking 1860 times. Even Leah, who took the fewest turns (see Table 10), said in her exit interview, “I felt very comfortable talking” (Leah, Exit Interview). Leah cited her expertise in “LGBT stuff” as a factor in “working with teachers as equals” (Leah, Exit Interview).

Based on these numbers, it appears that students’ ease in speaking during meetings sometimes put teachers on the sidelines, watching and listening but taking few turns in the conversation. As I facilitated the first CDT meeting with students and teachers together, for example, I noticed the balance of the conversation was tipping excessively in favor of students. So, following an extended stretch of dialogue about sexuality in history and literature, in which Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright sat quietly for four and a half minutes, I tried to pivot the conversation to the teachers, asking what aspects of writing assignments they thought might be modified. “I guess, maybe I can rely on Mr.
Jones and Ms. Wright a little bit more here” I hedged, hoping they would take up my question. Ms. Wright offered a two-word response: “Maybe genre?” (Ms. Wright, CDT#1) Then, Aria addressed my question with a 78-word response. So I had to try again:

Let me steer it back to Ms. Wright because I want to give Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones a chance to explain what might be some areas we should look at in terms of building writing assignments or writing instruction. What goes into it for you?

What are the elements or ingredients? (Mike, CDT#1)

This time, Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones offered lengthier responses over seven turns. Yet, in spite of one more effort by me to turn the conversation back to the teachers, student participants took almost all of the turns during the remainder of the meeting. With an audience of three educators, students seized their opportunity to vent their frustration and explain their vision for queer literacy activities.

Turn taking did not resemble classroom interactions, where Discourse largely follows a pattern of Initiation-Response-Evaluation (Mehan, 1979), which Cazden (2001) calls “the default pattern” of instruction (p. 53). Instead, the meeting structure, as well as the authority that goes along with expertise, gave all participants “speaking rights,” so that “self-selection” rather than “teacher nomination” characterized turn taking (Cazden, 2001 p. 54). This dynamic sometimes led to messy turns, such as cross-talk and interruptions. It also gave teachers relief from instructing so they had the opportunity to listen to students without distraction. Finally, the dynamic gave students extended opportunities to talk to teachers, not in terms of seeking evaluation or information, but in terms of giving advice on curriculum. In CDT meetings, turn taking looked and sounded
more democratic than in classrooms.

Table 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>CDT#1 combined</th>
<th>CDT#2 group</th>
<th>CDT#2 combined</th>
<th>CDT#3 group</th>
<th>CDT#3 combined</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mr. Jones</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>367</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>351</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casey</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aria</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beatrix</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mike</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willow</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>174</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Wright</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leah</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>156</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mr. Jones led all participants in turns during Curriculum Design Team meetings, with 367 turns. However, Kate and Casey, who worked with Mr. Jones in the social studies group, were close behind with 351 and 349 respectively. Some of his turns, like those of the student participants, were longer in duration. On the other hand, Ms. Wright was near the bottom of all participants, with 166 turns, 200 fewer than Mr. Jones. Very few of her turns were long in duration; instead, she mostly listened to students, paraphrasing their ideas and asking questions. The quantity and substance of turns taken by participants reflected a shift in roles for teachers and students, with teachers acknowledging the presence of students as knowledge authorities in the curriculum-development process.
Roles played by teachers during meetings. Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones adapted to the novel dynamics of the Curriculum Design Team by embracing familiar yet ancillary professional roles. Garmston and Wellman (1999) describe four possible roles for active participants of a working group: facilitator, engaged participant, recorder, or knowledge authority (p. 81). One role played by both teachers, to a lesser degree, was “knowledge authority,” because they brought a specialized skill set and knowledge base to meetings (Garmston & Wellman, 1999, p. 85). As knowledge authority, Ms. Wright offered expertise in her content area, language arts, as well as insights about curriculum development. Mr. Jones shared his knowledge about American history as well as diversity issues. However, due to the participation of students, each teacher embraced an additional role, different from knowledge authority. Ms. Wright adopted the primary role of “facilitator” (Garmston & Wellman, 1999, p. 85), which she performed often in her classes when facilitating discussions. A facilitator, according to Garmston and Wellman, “focuses group energy, keeps the group on task, and directs the process” (1999, p. 83). In addition to knowledge authority, Mr. Jones stepped into the primary role of “engaged participant” (Garmston & Wellman, 1999, p. 81), a role he also performed when planning with his social studies colleagues. During a meeting, an engaged participant will actively “seek and provide data” (Garmston & Wellman, 1999, p. 82). In their principal roles of engaged participant and facilitator respectively, Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright complemented and supported the contributions students made as knowledge authorities, as I will show using data from transcripts.

Ms. Wright: Facilitating the experts. The dynamics in the language arts group meetings resembled a moderated discussion, with Ms. Wright taking the roles of
facilitator and recorder and students serving as discussants, or “experts,” as Ms. Wright labeled them (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). Ms. Wright explained her role in the meetings: “The way that the whole process went, the kids were generating these writing prompts. I felt like a teacher. I felt like I was facilitating: ‘Here are some questions you might like to think about’ and then they did all the work” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). Her job, she said, “was really listening, asking questions, and listening” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview).

During the language arts group meetings, there were several long stretches of dialogue among students when Ms. Wright sat silently, only listening and recording notes. At the beginning of the first language arts group meeting, for example, Ms. Wright asked students a few questions about where they should start the planning process. After 12 turns by Aria, Leah, Willow and Daisy, she asked some clarifying questions about the focus of the writing assignment: “Are you talking about civil rights? Are you talking about LGBTQ issues? I'm going to throw a bunch of poems and articles and things at you on gay rights?” (Ms. Wright, CDT#2_LA) After 19 more turns by students, Ms. Wright told the group, “You guys have a lot of ideas you just put out there” (Ms. Wright, CDT#2_LA). She explained what an essential question\(^2\) is and paraphrased what she heard students discuss. She wondered what essential questions might guide students in her classes as they thought conceptually about the entire writing assignment. By this point in the first language arts group meeting, the dialogue had shifted to a focus on the theme of identity, and students began describing books, TV shows, movies, and websites that might compose a unit of study about identity. For nearly 13 minutes, most of Ms. Wright’s turns involved restating the title of a resource cited by a student; otherwise, she

\(^2\) Wiggins & McTighe (2005) define an essential question as “a question that lies at the heart of a subject or curriculum…and promotes inquiry and uncovery of a subject” (p. 342).
listened to Discourses raised by students as they reviewed each of the resources. Later, still in her role as facilitator, she told students, “I guess I'm a little confused” (Ms. Wright, CDT#2_LA). She asked how expansive they intended the unit on identity to be: would it be focused solely on queer identities or also look at gender and race? Her questions prompted students to explore Discourses around identity, while Ms. Wright continued to play the role of facilitator, periodically offering insights about curriculum development and gently guiding the discussion toward the task of creating a writing assignment.

Ms. Wright again picked up the role of facilitator and recorder, perhaps with a bit more urgency, in the second meeting of the language arts group. Her turns increased from the previous meeting, from 45 to 81. Using the handout I provided (see Table 11) to guide the discussion toward producing a writing assignment, she asked more focused questions about developing a writing assignment. She also continued to ask clarifying questions, such as a possible prompt to spur thinking about the writing assignment: “Should I put that up there with the other essential questions?” (Ms. Wright, CDT#3_LA) She inquired about thematic content, too, when students were describing a character from a movie who had been diagnosed as HIV-positive. “That is a huge identity issue, right?” she asked (Ms. Wright, CDT#3_LA). When she found herself drawn into the conversation, Ms. Wright added a few comments of her own. As Aria and Willow were talking about hair length, with shorter hair meaning a woman is “butched up” (Aria, CDT#3_SS), Ms. Wright volunteered, “It’s amazing how girls can change their appearance so quickly” (Ms. Wright, CDT#3_LA). But this was a rare contribution. Her 81 turns were dwarfed by the students’ 416 turns, and were much shorter in duration. For Ms. Wright, facilitating “is the place I go naturally” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). During
her exit interview, she said, “They are the experts, right? I will ask the questions and let them figure out what’s going on” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). In tending to the conversation, Ms. Wright was facilitating her own learning experience, a twist on class discussions where the teacher manages dialogue among students as a means to facilitate their learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions to guide development of writing assignment in content groups</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1. What kind of writing would students produce? (What is the product or performance?)  
2. What topics or themes would be covered?  
3. What prompt (or prompt choices) would students address?  
4. What are some essential questions for students to consider during the unit?  
5. What evidence outcomes would be addressed by this writing assignment?  
6. What texts would students read and analyze to learn about the topics?  
7. What texts would students read and imitate to produce the assigned writing?  
8. What activities will support students in their learning and in producing a piece of writing? |

**Mr. Jones: Comfortable collaboration.** The dynamics of the social studies group was different from the language arts group, with Mr. Jones acting as an engaged participant alongside students, rather than facilitator and recorder. Mr. Jones did not paraphrase or ask questions designed to lead students in the process of building a writing assignment. Instead, he joined Casey, Kate, and Beatrix in generating ideas for the history writing assignment. For example, when the group discussed sexuality for 10 minutes during their first social studies group meeting, Mr. Jones listened, offered collegial affirmation (“Right” or “Yeah”), and shared his own insights. The group bounced from topic to topic, exploring gender roles, testosterone, chromosomes, and
MAKING SPACE FOR UNSANCTIONED TEXTS

sexual activity among bonobos (a primate related to the chimpanzee), among others. Only when the conversation veered into “high school gossip” (Beatrix, CDT#2_SS) did Mr. Jones redirect: “Now we’re really digressing. Now we’re really out of it” (Mr. Jones, CDT#2_SS). Halfway through the second meeting of the social studies group, it was Kate who used the planning handout I provided (see Table 11) to steer the group toward completion of its writing assignment. Due to Mr. Jones’ role as an engaged participant, the dialogue among members of the social studies group was less structured.

During his exit interview, Mr. Jones used the word “collaboration” to describe his working relationship with student participants, which he also used to describe how he works with colleagues in his social studies department. “Collaboration with teachers is great,” he said, “but collaboration with students… they’re the ones who go through the stuff that we’re doing, so then to talk to them and say, ‘What works for you? What doesn’t work for you?’” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview) Because it was up to Mr. Jones to implement the lesson plans, the students were able to “help” him during the process of developing curriculum. “I think that was the piece for me that was the most enjoyable (was) just to see them really looking to push some things forward, but also to help me out with lesson plans that I thought were going to be pretty fun,” he said. “They came up with some very creative activities for us to do” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). Casey, Beatrix, and Kate brought passion, student perspective, and expertise regarding queer issues, according to Mr. Jones. “They are very knowledgeable about issues and topics within the LGBTQ community,” he said (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). Confidence in their expertise made students feel comfortable in sharing marginalized Discourses about curriculum with Mr. Jones. “There was disagreement and I was really glad that they felt
so comfortable, like saying, ‘No, we don’t want to do that. What you’re saying, it doesn’t sound like its good. What about this?’” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview) For Mr. Jones, developing curriculum collaboratively with students from the Gay-Straight Alliance was generative, due to their ease in performing the role of knowledge authority.

**The role played by students during meetings.** During the first meeting with students (with no teachers present), I raised the idea that meetings might be influenced by traditional, teacher-student power dynamics, especially in regard to curriculum:

Mike: So this is going to be interesting because I’m trying to level the playing field, teachers and students working together. It’s a little more democratic than the way that curriculum is (typically) developed. Like I said, usually you’re on the receiving end of curriculum, but you’ll be developing curriculum. Does that mean things are necessarily going to be equal between you and teachers?

Daisy: They just have more knowledge than us about curriculum.

Willow: No matter what, just being younger, like, they do take what we say with a grain of salt.

Kate: But I also think it makes us…equals. I don’t know any of the teachers. I don’t know anything about any of them. For me, that makes them… I don’t see them as teachers. When I meet them, it’ll just be as an adult. I would give us a leg up in a way, because we’re in G.S.A. and stuff, where none of them are. So even though they know how to write curriculum, they don’t know specifics around that.

Daisy: We know more about the issues. (Student Meeting #1)

Daisy and Kate asserted the power of student participants based on their expertise. And even though Willow questioned the likelihood of power being exercised equally among
teachers and students, she did not refrain in sharing her ideas with teachers during Curriculum Design Team meetings. All of the students – without exception – shared their knowledge of marginalized Discourses during meetings with teachers, in spite of longstanding, teacher-student power dynamics.

Power relations were maintained in a small but significant way when I asked teachers and students to create pseudonyms for themselves at the beginning of our first meeting together. My own words (heard on the audio recording) were responsible for upholding traditional forms of address. When Ms. Wright asked if the teachers needed pseudonyms, I replied, “Yes, so one of the exciting things you get to do is choose the name you want to go by. It would be your last name” (Mike, CDT#1). A minute later, Leah asked for clarification.

Leah: It’s going to be our last name?

Kate: No, no. Just the teachers.

Casey: For us, it’s our first name. (CDT#1)

Even though student participants called me “Mike,” the activity I designed helped to remind students and teachers of their relationships in school. The playing field, though shifting, was never quite as level as I promised student participants.

While pseudonym activity was a subtle reminder of traditional teacher-student dynamics, it did not inhibit students from asserting as well as contesting power during meetings. A telling example came at the end of the second Curriculum Design Team meeting, when I asked the language arts and social studies groups to present their work to the entire team. Kate wanted clarification about my directions: “Should the teachers talk and see what they got out of it? Or should the students talk?” (Kate, CDT#2) Even
though Kate deferred to me with her question, the two options she offered momentarily tilted power from teachers to students. Seemingly, her first option of having teachers present demonstrates deference to teachers by asking, “Should the teachers talk…” and then adding a qualifier, “…and see what they got out of it?” Kate put the teachers in the role of being tested on their learning, akin to how students are required to perform on classroom assessments. She also offered the option of having students talk (with no qualifier), presumably as discursive “equals.” Kate’s question epitomized the roles taken by students and teachers in the meetings of the Curriculum Design Team, with power being asserted by students via their role as knowledge authority.

Humor as a queer sensibility. Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones both described the Curriculum Design Team meetings as “fun” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview; Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). Mr. Jones said, “I had a good time” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). He noted the student participants had “a lot of energy” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). The CDT meetings were unlike classroom discussions. “The conversation they were having were not conversations kids have in my classes all the time, and so it was interesting to hear them,” Ms. Wright explained. “And then they have their little jokes and things going on throughout the whole time. It was fun” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). Students improvised scenes from queer life, and reenacted little bits of comedy. They teased each other and were quick to laugh. Their humor was laden with commentary about dominant Discourses, particularly in regard to queer issues and identities. Students used humor to explore identity or make political statements. Disrupting norms or challenging ignorance was often part of a fierce punchline. Humor served as antidote to serious dialogue about oppression and was equal in its instructional merits.
The social studies group shared a lot of funny comments about serious and not-so-serious topics during their meetings. Casey offered running commentary during meetings, like “The Kinsey Scale is fun!” (CDT#2_SS) and “British accents are fun!” (CDT#3_SS) When Beatrix objected to turning on the fluorescent lights, she put on her sunglasses, leading to this exchange.

   Casey: Take off your sunglasses, Beatrix darling.

   Beatrix: I don't like ... it’s so bright!

   Mr. Jones: Just like your future.

The jokes kept the mood of the meetings fun and generative, with teachers sometimes joining in. Humor also highlighted the serious nature of the work participants were doing. When Beatrix couldn’t recall the title of a book, Kate and Casey helped her by looking online.

   Beatrix: Down by the waterfront, I think it's called, which is about the queer community of Brooklyn in the 1930s and '40s.

   Kate: Down by the waterfront?

   Beatrix: It's something on the waterfront. It's something by the waterfront.

   Casey: Look up gay waterfront. [Crosstalk 00:02:43]. Don’t look that up.

   Kate: We'll start having pictures of gay people on waterfronts.

Kate and Casey commented on their precarious situation: looking for queer resources in a school setting could lead to graphic images of gay people, which, under different circumstances, could lead to punishment or harassment. Certain kinds of searches might be feasible in the privacy of one’s home, but not in school. Students interested in queer
topics have to proceed with caution when seeking resources online, in a way that others conducting heteronormative searches might not have to.

Students also used humor to anticipate and counter potential homophobic responses to the curriculum they were developing. During a language arts group meeting, Willow raised the premise of a short film, *Love is All You Need?* (Shields, 2013), which is set in a world where same-sex couples are the norm. She wondered if they could build a writing prompt that would invite students to imagine waking up in an alternative reality. Leah didn’t like where students might go with the prompt: “Some people might be writing about taking their AK-47 and assassinating the whole planet. You never know.” Daisy quipped, “Then we can talk about gun control!” Willow added, “A healthy debate about gun control!” (CDT#3_LA) If Leah’s statement offered a dismal assessment about writing prompts that broach challenging topics, Daisy and Willow humorously raised the stakes by adding gun control, adding a dash of determined optimism to the daunting challenge of educating their peers. Students performed humor throughout meetings with teachers, telegraphing to the adults that curriculum development could be fun.

**Language with a queer sensibility.** Student participants disrupted traditional teacher-student dynamics by modeling language with a queer sensibility for teachers as well as for each other. It wasn’t just employing queer lingo, because both Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones skillfully used terms dealing with gender and sexuality. It was how students reframed utterances (Bakhtin, 1982), including both their own and those of the participating teachers. Students applied terminology to give other’s utterances a critical perspective. Students also demonstrated self-awareness when constructing utterances, reflecting on and reframing their own words. In addition, students suggested identities for
each other and for adult participants. Finally, when students struggled to find the right words, utterances were communally constructed, like when one person finishes a sentence for another person. Students’ use of language flipped classroom scripts, queering instructional strategies they experienced in classrooms to productively disrupt meeting dynamics and demonstrate their own queer linguistic moves. In performing roles normally performed by teachers in the classroom, students fostered agency (Butler, 1990) among individual members of the team as well as promoted team solidarity.

Revoicing as student prerogative. Students actively named and reframed Discourses during meetings. I experienced this phenomenon in my second meeting with students (with no teachers present), as we talked about how Discourse constructs identity, and how can people respond negatively when someone’s words or actions don’t match a Discourse. For example, I told students a story about how in college my friends would hold parties and usually tell one or two people it was a costume party.

Kate: That's so funny.

Mike: They were the only one wearing a costume. When you don't fit in, then you start to feel like ... that's when you feel that tension.

Kate: If it was a cool costume then they could be the coolest at the party.

Kate reframed my message – mediating another possible meaning – by suggesting a costume could make someone “the coolest at the party,” even if the gathering wasn’t a costume party. While a costume can disrupt party Discourses, it doesn’t have to be traumatic. It can actually be cool, especially if the person wearing the costume put thought and effort into their costume. In reading and re-reading this passage, I was struck by how Kate elegantly reframed my story’s message. I was struck by how my authority
as a PhD student on the topic of Discourses had suddenly been eroded. I was struck by what I had learned from Kate.

During our first Curriculum Design Team meeting, a discussion about school computers led to consensus that Coolidge has more resources than other schools because of the affluence of the community. Ms. Wright explained, “We have parents who – if we need books and we don't have the money – we can ask parents, ‘Please, can we have money to buy books?’ Or, ‘Can you buy this book for your kid?’ They're really willing to support us in that way, which I think we forget sometimes that a lot of schools don't have that” (Ms. Wright, CDT#1). Student participants agreed with Ms. Wright’s depiction, stating their community often donates quality resources to the school, like “super fancy pipeheads for Biology classes” (Beatrix, CDT#1). It was Willow who was able to attach a label with a critical connotation, when she noted, “Yeah, we have that privilege. There's a lot of richer students here and they will have parents or relatives who are willing to help. In a lot of places, you wouldn't have that at all” (Willow, CDT#1; italics mine). By “revoicing” the narrative about the school’s good fortune as “privilege,” Willow was modeling “new terminology for familiar ideas” as well as reformulating what other participants said to “advance her own discussion agenda” (O’Connor & Michaels, in Hicks, 1996, p. 74), which is typically a teacher move. Like Kate, Willow’s agenda wasn’t to “simply describe existing realities”; instead, she “evaluates them” and “seeks to explain them…by showing them to be effects of structures or mechanisms or forces” (Fairclough, 2012, p. 66). It’s possible Willow may have encountered the term privilege in her courses at Coolidge; however, student participants definitely encountered the term during a G.S.A. meeting in an activity called Privilege Walk:
Aria: I brought in this activity where I gave everybody a different identity and it was about privilege. I read a bunch of scenarios and I said, “Step forward if you would feel comfortable in this scenario in the real world and at Coolidge High School.”

Leah: For example, mine was 16-year old girl raised in a Christian family who is pregnant and Aria would read off: “Step forward if you don't feel comfortable walking home by yourself at night,” or something like that. Just because I'm a female and just because I'm 16, I'm not comfortable. (CDT#1)

Because of their participation in activities like Privilege Walk, students in the study, like Willow, were able to both name and reframe Discourses during the Curriculum Design Team meetings in a way that highlighted the role of power. In naming a concept like privilege, Willow was also able to model for participants through revoicing (normally a teacher strategy) how to disrupt power by identifying its presence.

Revoicing is a practice student participants engaged in whenever and wherever queer issues become the topic of conversation, not just in CDT meetings. Students from Coolidge’s G.S.A. were on a mission to correct misconceptions regarding sexuality and gender. When Daisy proposed society is now much more accepting of non-normative sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression, Leah agreed, but still felt much work needed to be done. She described the way she revoices questions she gets as a knowledge authority: “That's why when people talk to me about, ‘Oh, is it hard for you being gay in your school?’ I say, ‘No, I am much more concerned about transgender students and agender students’ (CDT#1). Like Willow, Leah revoiced the question as a way to mediate Discourses about sexuality and gender, in this case, raising awareness of
transgender issues. Leah’s example was instructive for meeting participants, too, in prompting them to keep transgender youth in mind when creating activities and assignments.

**Self-correction strategy.** Student participants strove to use language about gender and sexuality with precision. In conveying queer Discourses and in mediating dominant Discourses, students made subtle adjustments to their utterances (Bakhtin, 1982), seeking the right words from an ocean of words. In a discussion with the language arts group, Daisy verbally explored the relationship between identity and empathy:

> I think another thing to emphasize is that if you don't have your identity, it's hard to be you because what if you did wake up and you were a different gender or you didn't love the person that you loved today or you didn't have the things that you have today. I think it's important for people to understand if we're looking at this from a gaining more acceptance standpoint, that even though you might not understand the queer lifestyle – just as an overarching term – it's part of people's lives and it's what helps them get up in the morning, so why should you try to take it away in some way or not? (CDT#2_LA)

Even though Daisy wants to refer to the lives of queer people, the term she lands on – “queer lifestyle” – is politically problematic. The term “gay lifestyle” has been used by homophobes to assert that, since homosexuality is a lifestyle choice, no special rights should be conferred on queer people. The counternarrative is that homosexuals are born that way. When members of the queer community say, “Being gay is not a choice,” they are taking a political stance. Daisy acknowledges slip with a parenthetical explanation: “just an overarching term.” Her self-correction or “self-initiated repair” (Lyster & Ranta,
1997, p. 49) taps into a reservoir of queer utterances that she has encountered and repeated. She uses the term not because she thinks it is accurate, which she acknowledges, but because it is expedient. In the vein of heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1982), she has repeated but also subversively transformed the term, from “gay” to “queer.” The second half of her sentence attempts to define “queer lifestyle,” when she explains, “…it's part of people's lives and it's what helps them get up in the morning…” Her explanation defers to the sensibility of queer people, including her peers in the meeting, whom she addresses as “you” in the first part of the passage. In the second part of the passage, however, “you” becomes an intolerant audience of homophobes who wish to take rights away from queer people. She employs the word “lifestyle” to resonate with bigots, even as she queers it. Her self-corrections are an effort to make sense of the word “lifestyle” for herself and others. In this passage, Daisy demonstrates critical awareness, and more specifically, a queer sensibility, as she engages in dialogue with real and imagined audiences.

Recasting errors as communal activity. Students “recast” (Lyster & Ranta, 1997, p. 47) each other’s speech errors in a way that resembled a communal enterprise rather than a form of teacher feedback. Lyster and Ranta (1997) define recast as “the teacher’s reformulation of all or part of a student’s utterance, minus the error” (p. 47). Kate, for example wanted to describe what she learned about sex education at a conference she attended with other G.S.A. members, but couldn’t recall precise terms.

Kate: A lot of us, we went to the conference at the college for safe schools.

Aria: Yeah. Safe Schools Coalition.
Kate: Yeah. Whatever. It was really cool. It was really interesting. One of the sessions, one of the breakout sessions, was about LGBTQ health topics. What do we call that? What was that word? Cooperative?

Daisy: Comprehensive.

Kate: Comprehensive.

Daisy: Sex education.

Aria: Comprehensive sex education. (CDT#1)

Kate’s utterances weren’t correctively recast as much as they were collectively articulated. Her response to Aria’s recasting of the conference title (“Yeah. Whatever.”) demonstrated mild irritation at being slowed in her storytelling, but at the end of the same turn, she knew she could rely on her peers to provide details for the story. A similar situation unfolded when Leah, Aria, and Daisy jointly described an important book for their unit about identity.

Leah: I'm thinking more it's not even about the rights aspect. I'm pretty sure that’s in other classroom is what they're doing more. I'm thinking more, hey some people don't know what transgender means, so reading a book like Luna. I forget the author's name. Julie something.

Aria: Julianne-

Leah: Julianne Peters. She’s a Colorado native and it won some huge award. It's about a female-

Aria: No male.

Leah: Male to female transgender.

Aria: Teenager boy.
Leah: Teenage boy.

Aria: Starting off as a boy.

Daisy: Starting off as a boy and transitioning to a woman and how hard it is for her and going through the process and being bullied and stuff like that.

(CDT#2_LA)

The way Leah shifts the grammatical function of “teenager” from a noun to an adjective is emblematic of the whole excerpt. Each utterance builds directly off the previous utterance via repetition of a key word or phrase. In collaboratively recasting errors, the story gets told with greater accuracy, from the author’s name to the details of the character’s transition. Typically a form of mediation used by teachers in the classroom, as described in second language acquisition literature, students employed recast differently, decentering expertise from one person and distributing it among many.

**Identity work.** Students not only engaged in their own ongoing identity work, but used language to suggest identities for others, what Johnston (2004) calls “loaded invitations to construct particular identities” (p. 17). Casey invited Beatrix, for example, to step into the role of lead historian, as the social studies group sought to list leaders of civil rights movements.

Mr. Jones: So that’s the '50s. If we're doing '50s, '60s, '70s, which leaders of specific movements might we be looking at?

Casey: Beatrix, you know the most…go!

Beatrix: Harvey Milk probably.

Mr. Jones: He was '70s?

Beatrix: He was '70s.
Casey: Beatrix has done a lot of self-research, so she knows.

At Casey’s prompting, Beatrix led the group in discussing the merits of several of the key figures in the gay rights and queer liberation movements. Casey’s recognition of Beatrix for her specialized knowledge was not flattery; it was a move calculated to build agency with Beatrix. Willow made the same move for me several times during our work together, referring to me as “future Dr. Mike,” thereby fostering my “capacity for reflexive mediation” (Butler, 1990, p. 195) in enacting the role of researcher in a research study. In calling me “future Dr. Mike,” Willow was suggesting an “agentive identity” (Johnston, 2004, p. 26), offering me encouragement during a crucial point on my PhD timeline.

Willow’s move was so affirming for me that I wrote “future Dr. Mike” on my name plate during our icebreaker activity in the first CDT meeting. Throughout the study, student participants queered teacher moves, such as revoicing, recasting, modeling, and suggesting identity, as a means to build agency (Butler, 1993) among teachers and students.

**The Queer Knowledge of Youth: Lessons from Learners**

A teacher typically observes one classroom in a day (their own). In a day, a student might sit in six or seven classrooms, experiencing different teaching styles and learning activities. The queer knowledge of student participants was partly based on what they saw as recipients of curriculum across their school day. Students shared perceptions about what worked and what didn’t work in other classrooms. They shared their observations about how their peers reacted to writing assignments, anticipating trouble spots for teachers. Both groups, language arts and social studies, deliberated over details about writing assignments. The language arts group, for example, talked at length about
what grade level and course to put their assignment, offering insights into the maturity of straight classmates in exploring queer issues (later in high school) versus the maturity of queer youth in needing information about sexuality (earlier in high school). About the contribution of the students on the Curriculum Design Team, Willow explained, “I think because the students are in the classroom and they have that perspective, they know the best way to introduce things in which the students feel comfortable, because that’s their perspective” (Willow, Exit Interview). The social studies group engaged in extended discussion, over two meetings, about the logistics of their writing assignment. This section focuses on the dialogue of the social studies group, as students shared their queer knowledge as curriculum recipients with Mr. Jones.

A sensibility students brought to meetings was their knowledge of a range of activities and assignments from different teachers. At Coolidge, for example, a student may work with upwards of 25 teachers by the time they graduate. Mr. Jones acknowledged this sensibility in his exit interview when he summarized one benefit of collaborating with students was being able to ask, “What are some fun activities you’ve done in other classes that we can maybe use here?” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview) Student participants recommended holding a tea party, similar to what they experienced in their AP U.S. History class, where a dinner party was held. The tea party would consist of historical characters mingling and sharing their viewpoints on current events and issues. The premise was to have U.S. History students thoroughly research a historical figure, write a paper, and then stay in character throughout the tea party. Based on their experiences in other classes, Beatrix, Kate, and Casey helped Mr. Jones work through the
logistics of the assignment. The first issue they explored was how many historical figures should be the focus of the research activity.

Casey: Maybe, so that way, you wouldn't have to have a bunch of different people the teacher would need to know about. Maybe you could have five or six choices that either would be given randomly to the kids, or they'd get to pick them themselves. [crosstalk 00:16:22] First come, first serve.

Mr. Jones: [crosstalk 00:16:24] Have a list of like 20 people or something like that.

Casey: Yeah, where they get to pick whoever they want and, maybe if they really want to, they can ask for someone else, but ...

Beatrix: What we did in APUSH (AP U.S. History), we were just assigned and that made you research the person a lot.

Casey: Right.

Beatrix: I don't think we were assigned. I don't really remember. I don't think we knew beforehand who we were going to be. So we had to research all the people, and then when we went in, she said, “You're this person, you're this person.”

[crosstalk 00:16:47]

Casey: That would be tough if there were like 20 people.

Mr. Jones: That would be really hard.

Casey: I think it would be better if you give them one person, and then they have to look in depth. [crosstalk 00:16:56]

Beatrix: Like the week before or something?

Casey: Yeah. They would have to look in depth into their person, because then
you get better ideas, because if you only looked up one article on each of the 20
guys, you're not going to know that much, and like half the questions you'll be
sitting there like, “I have no clue what he would think about this.” (CDT#2_SS)
The social studies group settled on idea of choosing one historical figure to research in
depth, rather than being put on the spot to recall information from the life of one person
among several historical figures. Even though the AP U.S. History activity informed their
thinking, they decided way the assignment was set up in AP U.S. History was not the best
possible method for examining queer topics in the history course taught by Mr. Jones.
Beatrice and Casey played out the details of the assignment, based on their own
experiences, as well as trying to predict how teens might react.

The social studies group also dedicated time and energy to considering the
logistics of the tea party. They considered a whole-class dinner party, as well as a speed-
dating format where students rotated around the classroom, meeting in small groups.

Kate: Would you have it be the same as the dinner party in APUSH, where
everyone sits in their seats?

Mr. Jones: I think I like the idea of having smaller groups.

Casey: Yeah, that was really nice, because then you could… [crosstalk 00:26:57]

Kate: But then would you have it... In the way that we did it was like one group
would go and everyone else would sit and listen. So that you were learning about
whatever they were talking about, and then you'd switch them.

Mr. Jones: That's why I like the idea of people… [crosstalk 00:27:08]

Casey: Yeah, that seems like a bit too much pressure.

Mr. Jones: You can't sit with the same… [crosstalk 00:27:12]
Kate: Oh, so if it was five groups around and you're like...

Casey: Yeah, there would be five groups and then you would run out of time and then everyone would just get up and move to another desk. [crosstalk 00:27:21]

Mr. Jones: One person's allowed to stay...

Casey: Right. One person's allowed to stay, and then everyone else has to move and try to avoid… [crosstalk 00:27:27]

Kate: Okay, yeah, we do that in Spanish. That definitely works pretty well.

Again, students’ experiences in other classes informed the design of the tea party activity, with Kate advocating for the speed-dating approach from her Spanish class over the dinner party approach from AP U.S. History. Casey liked the small groups interacting simultaneously, rather than the “pressure” of one small group performing for the entire class. The attention to the details of the assignment stemmed from students’ past experiences – positive and negative – as curriculum recipients. Student participants were intent on helping Mr. Jones make the writing assignment work well.

Accountability was an issue of equal importance to all participants, teacher and students alike. Mr. Jones raised the issue of accountability, which students enthusiastically took up.

Mr. Jones: Putting that in, I really think that that could be positive. The issue for me, now I'm trying to think of how to hold students accountable for their discussion and...

Beatrix: The research.

Casey: What Ms. ________ did, was we had to write it down. We would go and then we'd write down, we’re on card number 1, which would be a certain question.
Then we would write down the people who were there and write down, in general, what they were saying.

Mr. Jones: So you would… [crosstalk 00:29:40]

Casey: Yeah, we took...

Mr. Jones: You would write down in your own notebook.

Casey: Right, I would have a page open and it would be like, let's say I'm sitting with Martin Luther King, Jr.

Mr. Jones: Mm-hmm. (affirmative)

Casey: I would write down MLK Jr., and in general, what their perspective was on the thing.

Mr. Jones: Okay.

Kate: Like a sentence or something.

Casey: Yeah, like a sentence.

Beatrix: Yeah, but the issue with that is, especially if you're trying to get more towards discussion, I know, I love taking part in discussions, and I love talking, but when I'm discussing stuff, I almost never write anything down. I'm so bad.

[crosstalk 00:30:10]

Kate: Well, you could even have a discussion, and then say, “Okay, you have 30 seconds to write down notes.”

Casey: Yeah, like a minute, and now you could all say.

Mr. Jones: “Nobody can talk, everybody write down.”

Casey: Or you can just say, “If you need to remember what someone said, you can ask them. This is your time for writing down, just real fast, what they said.”
Kate: Right.

Casey: So that way you can have your actual discussion, but you don't have to worry necessarily.

Kate: You can walk around and listen, like if everyone's like, “Oh, I'm going to prom this weekend.”

Casey: “Oh my God!!!”

Mr. Jones: (Laughs)

Kate: Not talking about minimum wage or whatever.

Beatrix: You could… [crosstalk 00:30:42]

Kate: “Well, it's minimum wage with prom.”

Beatrix: Or it could be like, you could hop in and be like, “I am a new person. This is a point.” If you see that the time has run out of stuff to say [crosstalk 00:30:52]. You come in and say, “I represent this group for this discussion.”

Mr. Jones: This would be really fun to do. (CDT#2_SS)

Again, activities from other classes inform the logistics of the assignment, with Casey citing her experience in AP U.S. History. When Beatrix shares her personal preference for not taking notes during discussions, the group offers a compromise, to take notes immediately after the discussion has concluded. While taking notes is one way to create accountability during the tea party, Kate suggests Mr. Jones may want to circulate among his students, in the role of evaluator. She knows students may be off task and out of character. She mimics a classmate talking about prom instead of history, and for good measure, Casey throws in an “Oh my God!!!” Beatrix offers another approach for Mr. Jones, suggesting that he enact a historical role and “hop” into small group discussions to
stimulate conversation. Throughout this excerpt, participants rehearse what might be said and what might happen during the activity, as a way to anticipate logistical hitches.

The group wrestled with the issue of sequencing the activity. They wondered if the research essay should be written first, as a ticket into the tea party, or if students should role play in the tea party as a way to generate and refine ideas for their essay. Mr. Jones thought the tea party should go first, to promote “out of the box thinking” (Mr. Jones, CDT#3_SS). Casey advocated for the essay first, worried students wouldn’t connect their essay to the tea party.

Casey: So if you make them write the essay…

Mr. Jones: Then they will do the research.

Casey: Then they will do the research.

Mr. Jones: And it could be the ticket into the tea party.

Casey: Then they get a fun thing to do when they already know a lot about these people, because they just wrote a paper on it.

Mr. Jones: Right. So have a writing assignment…

Kate: Even if someone doesn't enjoy it, they will do the research. They don’t miss the paper, usually.

Casey: Or if they do, then they miss the paper-

Mr. Jones: We don’t want to stereotype all of them into the same…

Casey: If they miss the paper, then they don’t get into the tea party. If they miss the paper, they also get a bad grade.

Kate: Most people wouldn't just let a big paper and an assignment go. They might let the tea party’s grade go and then write a good paper based on what they’ve
heard at the tea party.

Mr. Jones: The tea party would be a fun way to wrap up.

Casey: Right. It would be kind of like a wrap up thing, like another version of show what you know, but it's more in context and out of the box versus just a flat out essay.

Kate: Most people wouldn't miss both grades, but they would potentially miss just the tea party, knowing that they would do the essay after. (CDT#3_SS)

To aid Mr. Jones in making a decision, Kate and Casey play all the angles as they argue for the essay first, elevating the idea of student motivation. They believe students will write the paper to participate in the activity, and/or they will write the paper for a grade. Placing the essay first prepares students for the fun activity, which appeals to Mr. Jones, who implies (with a bit of sarcasm about stereotyping) that students aren’t necessarily motivated to write papers. Casey neatly wraps up the case for essay by emphasizing the sequencing will lead to an “out of the box” essay, a phrase Mr. Jones had used to describe his hopes for this proposed writing assignment.

The social studies group spent considerable time during their two meetings researching the gay rights/queer liberation movement, using their smart phones to search for leaders, events, and organizations that Mr. Jones should know about. At one point Mr. Jones retrieved a book from his classroom, joining the group in the researching activity, as a means to expand Civil Rights content coverage beyond an exclusive focus on African-American leaders. “We got so off topic,” Mr. Jones said, as he reflected on planning the writing assignment with Casey, Kate, and Beatrix. “Not off topic, but researching: ‘What are some of the early activists in the LGBTQ community? Who were
some of those people?' And then looking them up and finding out what people had been working and done and groups that they had created” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview).

Researching as part of the planning process deviated from how Mr. Jones planned with colleagues, but he expressed his appreciation to students at discovering a trove of ready-to-use resources.

Beatrix: If you want to find people, just do National History Day on this. It has a great list of a bunch of folk.

Mr. Jones: And readings and YouTube videos and…

Kate: I'm sure we could just use that for your lessons.

Mr. Jones: I'm really glad we're glad we're doing this, so that…

Kate: So you know what you have. (CDT#3_SS)

About queer activism during the latter part of the 20th century, Mr. Jones said, “I think that was the thing that really came about for me was how little I actually know about it” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). Students in both groups made time to connect Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright to resources, an important step in queering their curriculum, even though that process deviated from how teachers normally collaborate on planning lessons and units.

For Mr. Jones, such attention to logistics was different from his experiences developing curriculum with other teachers. “Most of my collaboration is like, ‘What’s the big picture and then let’s go back and go piece by piece by piece, because it will save you time” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). Collaborating with students, however, was much different, because students were more interested in “going step by step by step to get to the big picture” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview). Regarding the focus on logistics, Casey explained, “When you're making the little pieces of curriculum, you can't just say, ‘Oh,
we're going to do things like a tea party,’ and then that's it. We… have to decide the focus is going to be the Civil Rights era. We have to start making a list of people who we are going to include in the tea party” (Casey, Exit Interview). Student dialogue about “little pieces of curriculum” involved mentoring teachers about resources, outside the sanctioned curriculum. Sharing what you find on your smart phone – electronically and face-to-face – is characteristic of how people learn today.

Both groups did have big-picture ambitions, with language arts focusing on identity and social studies focusing on rights. But the planning process involving students set aside standards and content objectives to instead emphasize classroom activities, such as research, discussion, writing, reading, watching films, and role playing. To students in the social studies group, it was important to rehearse the tea party activity, including logistics relating to sequencing, participation, accountability, and content. Getting logistics right influences the experience students in the classroom will have with the assignment. At stake are student engagement and motivation, not state standards. The fixation on details was the same for the language arts group, where students spent a lot of meeting time discussing resources. Daisy explained the value of the student perspective during the curriculum development process: “If we gave someone X, Y, Z in a project, they either wouldn't do it or would do it, or would enjoy it, or wouldn't enjoy it, so I think it helped the curriculum design – what we designed – to be a little more student friendly and actually interest the minds of teenagers, which can be a challenge” (Daisy, Exit Interview). With the queer sensibility of a curriculum recipient, students in the study spoke about what motivates them, and what might motivate their classmates, as they designed writing assignments in collaboration with teachers.
The Knowledge of Queer Youth: Discourses from the Outside In

When students in the study did not receive adequate information about sexuality and gender in school, they turned to Discourses from a variety of media platforms to find answers about their identities. In the preliminary interview, for example, Leah told me the young adult novels of Julie Anne Peters “made me realize yes, I am a lesbian” (Leah, Prelim Interview). They also turned to Netflix or LOGO (a cable network) or young adult novels to learn how to contest Discourses that were demeaning to the queer community. The meetings of the Curriculum Design Team proved to be another venue for students to critique and embrace Discourses, with Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones listening and contributing and taking up Discourses. Student knowledge about Discourses was sometimes imperfect and always exploratory; at the same time, teacher participants often thoughtfully articulated their own perceptive ideas about sexuality and gender. However, the distinctive element of planning with queer students is how marginalized Discourses migrated into curriculum, largely via students’ experiences with multiliteracies, which are characterized by “local diversity and global connectedness” as well as “the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies” (Cazden et al., 1996, p 61). In portraying the knowledge of queer youth, I trace Discourses addressed in Curriculum Design Team meetings, as much as possible, to resources cited by student participants, as a means to show how students in the study queered curriculum from the outside in.

Characteristics of student knowledge. Knowledge of student participants wasn’t confined to historical facts and figures, or works of literature; instead, their knowledge was shaped by a queer sensibility, informed by texts they encountered outside
the school-sanctioned curriculum. Aria and Daisy explained to teacher participants the role of the Internet in their lives:

Aria: We talked about the power of the media in G.S.A. Everybody in G.S.A. that are... we're all in the Gay-Straight Alliance here. We've talked about all being self-taught. Everything we know, we taught ourselves. No one ever taught this to us.

Daisy: The Internet taught us.

Aria: Everything we know about the gay movement, we wanted to find out.

Because of huge gaps in curriculum, students in the study said they were forced and motivated to seek Discourses about sexuality and gender outside of school, even though they attended a progressive school like Coolidge with informed teachers like Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright. During their meetings with teachers, students introduced topics as diverse as Achilles’ lovers; karposi sarcoma as a manifestation of AIDS; rape culture; the large number of women working as engineers in Iran; the effects of testosterone on the brain; the origins of the Food and Drug Administration; and comprehensive sex education. Knowledge of these topics was gathered outside of the sanctioned school curriculum, as students watched movies, read books, and scrolled through webpages, seeking insights about their place in the world. According to novelist John Rechy, a queer sensibility is “unique” because it is “shaped by exile” (Pizzoli, 2014). The metaphor of exile is apt for this study, because banishment of queer texts, topics, and issues from curriculum gave way in our meetings to welcoming different knowledge.

Students’ different knowledge – different from teachers and informed by difference – meant questioning heteronormative readings of school-sanctioned texts. For
example, Casey and Beatrix processed events and characters in *Great Expectations* (Dickens, 1861) differently than their classmates.

Beatrix: Last year, we read *Great Expectations* and nobody else saw this way, but I put out the question like, “What if Herbert and Pip were both bi or queer in some way?” and I thought they were personally.

Casey: You got laughed at. They were both guys.

Beatrix: They were both guys and I was like...

Kate: Are they (Pip and Herbert) together? I've never heard about it.

Beatrix: They are not together.

Casey: They are not together, but they kind of act like it. Yeah. (cross talk). I noticed I would get like… if I would suggested that kind of stuff to people outside of my friend group, I got weird looks or laughed at when I suggested that kind of stuff like, “What? They are just two straight guys living together, teaching each other how to dance, and you're telling me they love each other. It's not gay at all.”

(CDT#1)

In spite of their classmates’ responses to their queer interpretations of canonical texts, Casey and Beatrix persisted in raising the possibility that characters like Pip and Herbert might be something other than straight, and even called into question what it means to be straight. Empowered students like Casey and Beatrix were able to employ their queer sensibility, at a cost, within the confines of the literary canon.

Students’ different knowledge also included the purposeful use of logic in arguments, as a way to effectively counter heteronormative and homophobic Discourses. Kate questioned piety of judgmental religious peers who selectively but illogically apply
biblical principles to their lives and the lives of others. Casey and Daisy cited evidence of non-normative sexuality in the animal kingdom to argue for a biological basis for homosexuality. Willow turned to documentaries like *For the Bible Tells Me So* (Karslake, 2007) and *Before Stonewall* (Schiller & Rosenberg, 1984) for factual ammunition in the war against homophobia. Students repeatedly insisted that homosexuality is a “historical fact” (Kate, CDT#1) and queer people have always existed. The beauty of the writing assignment designed by the social studies group, for example, was that it only required students in a history class to deal with facts about how women and queers and Latinos fought for their equality, too. Even the highly emotional movie *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), recommended by Daisy and Willow, places facts on a pedestal. Andrew Beckett (Tom Hanks) is a lawyer who sues his former firm, believing he was the victim of discrimination. He hires Joe Miller (Denzel Washington) to defend him. The scene where they pore over law books is a queer shrine to reason in the fight for equality:

Joe Miller: The Federal Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibits discrimination against otherwise qualified handicapped persons who are able to perform the duties required by their employment. Although the ruling did not address the specific issue of HIV and AIDS discrimination...

Andrew Beckett: Subsequent decisions have held that AIDS is protected as a handicap under law, not only because of the physical limitations it imposes, but because the prejudice surrounding AIDS exacts a social death which precede...

which precedes the physical one.

Joe Miller: This is the essence of discrimination: formulating opinions about others not based on their individual merits, but rather on their membership in a
group with assumed characteristics. (Demme, 1993)

In performing the persona of a historical figure, whose stances had been thoroughly researched, students in a history class could leave their opinions behind and instead focus on how historical figures might consider current issues, like gay marriage or minimum wage, as Casey and Mr. Jones concluded:

Casey: Right, because then they don't have to have the opinion necessarily. It's just what the person they're talking about would think.

Mr. Jones: You're thinking about it from a different lens, too.

Casey: Right.

Mr. Jones: You're thinking about it historically. (CDT#2_SS)

Mr. Jones took up the idea that students in his history class might be able to set aside their beliefs to perform the beliefs of another person as well as to analyze current events. To move history students beyond their closely held opinions, Casey, Kate, and Beatrix lobbied for a rigorous research component to the social studies writing assignment, as a means to combat the irrationality of heteronormative and homophobic Discourses.

Students’ different knowledge also included an affective component, which teacher participants noted. Mr. Jones used the word “passion” five times to describe students’ participation in meetings, while Ms. Wright characterized students as being “open” and “genuine” in sharing their “strong opinions” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview; Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). Student knowledge was infused with “emotional habitus,” which Gould (2009) says is derived from “specific experiences of oppression” (p. 35). During the study, students voiced indignation at queer history being left out of history books. They revealed a fear of repercussions for inserting queer issues and identities into the
curriculum. They expressed sadness about how members of the queer community, particularly transgender people, are treated by society. They exhibited pride in their identity. They conveyed how much they loathed ignorance and intolerance in their school. Kate shared her frustration in a story about a teacher, for example, who attempted to use the word “retard” as a joke. After Kate told the teacher the word offended her because she has a developmentally disabled sibling, the teacher made even more awkward attempts at humor with the offending word.

It's awkward because she is ignorant and doesn't get that it's not OK because I had to talk to her about it. But then, it's awkward because even though (she uses the word) she is not in trouble. She did it or whatever. I don't really know, but you know what I mean? It's awkward and she makes it weird. (Kate, CDT#1)

Aria explained how affect and knowledge are bound together. “If we want to study (an issue) in LA class,” she said, “we often read a book so we can understand the emotional side of it” (Aria, CDT#1). Affect is always a presence in disrupting Discourses. Aria later cited the anger of ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) as an essential aspect of the group’s identity, as they worked to bring government attention to the AIDS crisis. Students in the study contested power not only with reason but also emotion.

**Contesting and embracing Discourses.** During Curriculum Design Team meetings, students explored Discourses about the visibility of queer people. They cited powerful Discourses about coming out of the closet and staying in the closet, which can be traced to resources they cited as well as their own personal experiences. They also emphasized that Discourses about coming out extend to straight people, as they contend with issues like substance abuse or mental illness. In the same way the queer community
tried to disrupt Discourses labeling AIDS as the gay man’s disease, students in the study seemed determined to contest coming out narratives as limited to queer people. Student participants also explored what it means to be queer, beyond coming-out-of-the-closet stories. Even as students emphasized difference and marginalization as characteristic of the queer community, they also wanted teachers to know that being queer is one facet of their complex identities.

**Visibility.** Aria described an opening comedy bit from the daytime talk show, *Ellen.* “I recently saw (an episode of) *Ellen* when she struggled to come out from behind the curtain and then she gets out finally. You see her struggling. She goes, ‘I haven’t had that hard of a time coming out since 1988.’ I lost it” (Aria, CDT#3_LA). The comedy bit by Ellen DeGeneres alludes to both the personal struggle to come-out as well as the political necessity some in the queer community ascribe to coming out. Coming out stands as a symbol of the larger issue of queer visibility, with members of the queer community overcoming silence, shame, and violence to openly and defiantly assert that a person’s human dignity should not be diminished by difference. Queer visibility was a Discourse students in the study surfaced again and again, in diverse ways.

In spite of concerns student participants had about being out and/or being outed, especially as part of class assignments, they discussed with teachers the importance of being able to openly expressing one’s identities. For students in the language arts group, *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) portrayed the consequences for loving whom you want, as well as the price you pay for not living the life you were meant to live. The movie, recommended by Daisy and Aria, shows the complicated relationship of two cowboys, Jack Twist and Ennis Del Mar, over nearly two decades, as they maintained traditional
gender roles and raised separate families, even though they loved each other. Willow believed Ennis should have made a life with Jack, in spite of taboos:

*(Brokeback Mountain)* definitely deals with what identity that others inflict on you, because you really see this heterosexual identity being imposed on them and their lives. These roles they're expected to fill. He's expected to have a wife and have a kid. That's the whole struggle of Heath Ledger's character, is that he thinks he's supposed to have this life, so he doesn't pursue what could have been a really amazing life with Jake Gyllenhaal. In the end, he realizes he regrets it. I think the main message of it is be true to yourself and true to your identity. (Willow, CDT#3_LA)

The bittersweet ending may reflect a character’s regrets, but it also reflects forces larger than Jack and Ennis, as Ennis tells Jack at one of their “fishing” retreats near in Wyoming.

Ennis Del Mar: If you can't fix it, Jack, you gotta stand it.

Jack Twist: For how long?

Ennis Del Mar: For as long as we can ride it. There ain't no reins on this one. (Lee, 1993)

The film’s ending prompted Aria to explain just how “intimidated” people become when queer people step out of the closet (CDT#3_LA). Queer visibility, Aria noted, can provoke a powerful homophobic response, such as murder. According to Ennis, Discourses cannot always be anticipated or controlled, only ridden like a bronco until you fall off. The movie contains vivid scenes to remind viewers why Ennis insists on remaining in the closet, no matter the consequences for him, Jack, or their families.

Coming out of the closet is not just a private matter, but is also a public concern.
Willow recommended *Outrage* (Dick, 2009), which documents the efforts of queer, non-mainstream journalists to out hypocritical, closeted politicians who have supported anti-gay legislation and policy throughout their careers, at the expense of the LGBTQ community. Congressional offices are targets for scorn because of their double lives: advancing an anti-gay agenda in their professional lives while pursuing same-sex liaisons in their private lives. Willow liked “the moral debate behind that (movie): is it right to out people and stuff?” (Willow, CDT#3_LA) The movie claims the closet is political, a tool of oppression. Likewise, *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008), recommended by Daisy, shows several scenes where Harvey Milk insists coming out of the closet is a political act that will end discrimination.

Students in the study acknowledged the variety of Discourses movies contained about coming out, and expressed to teacher participants a desire to incorporate identity exploration in writing assignments. Leah and Daisy described school assignments where they were able to share coming out stories. Leah used her coming out story for a college application essay, and Daisy told her story in a letter to politicians, lobbying for marriage equality. Students took an expansive notion of coming out, not limited to gender and sexuality but also including drug abuse, eating disorders, and any other difficult secret a person can harbor. Leah, Aria, and Willow characterized the memoir of actress Portia De Rossi, entitled *Unbearable Lightness: A Story of Loss and Gain* (2010), as a disclosure of both her eating disorder and her sexuality. While endorsing films like *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008) that end tragically, Daisy implored the language arts group to consider making space for coming out stories where characters didn’t become victims:

I think it's also important to have, this is probably not on topic, but it's also
important to have stories about happy gay people and people who are comfortable
with their identities (crosstalk in agreement) and who are accepted for their
identities, because I know before I came out, I was so afraid that I was going to be
beat up or my parents wouldn’t accept me or my friends think I was weird,
because I heard so many stories of people committing suicide, self harm, getting
diseases, stuff like that. It was just like, “I’m going to have a terrible life if I come
out,” which was obviously irrational because we live in (an accepting community)
and my parents are very supportive of me. But still, I felt like the media sent that
message that if you are gay, you going to suffer, especially in your teenage years.

(Daisy, CDT#2_LA)

Harvey Milk’s message about visibility is instructive for educators with students like
Daisy. By putting more stories in circulation, including counternarratives about happier
circumstances, students might not fear coming out in the way that Daisy did.

The idea that queers have always been around was an important aspect of
recognition for the social studies group. When Beatrix discovered Jeb and Dash: Diary of
“would be really cool for ‘Yeah, there was gay people before Stonewall Riots’” (Beatrix,
CDT#3_SS). Casey found affirmation for coming out in old French photographs, which
also proved that queer people are not a recent phenomenon.

There was an interesting thing that I saw the other day where it was like a
photographer and … It's something like the ’30s or ’40s or ’50s, he went to Paris
and he took pictures of these transwomen in Paris. It was really interesting. They
were really nice pictures. It was really cool. It shows how far back it actually goes,
that it's not just this fad that’s happening now. It's like this is an actual thing that happened in the '30s and '40s and '50s and stuff. It’s not like these darn Tumblr activists are making stuff on the Internet. (Casey, CDT#3_SS)

Visibility, found in photographs or diary entries from unsanctioned texts, was a necessary means to contest Discourses that compel silence and shame. Being queer is “not just this fad that’s happening now,” but rather, a more universal experience that can be instructive to queer and straight alike.

Students made a persuasive case to teachers for visibility, based on texts they encountered outside of the school day as well as their own experiences. In his exit interview, Mr. Jones affirmed the message students conveyed about visibility:

You can just tell that they were thankful that they got an opportunity to work within that and that it was something that could be very liberating for someone who was questioning or unsure, or who wants to be out but it is just feeling too much pressure, to now have an opportunity to work on some things that aren’t open. You’re not going to be sitting here telling everybody about it, but you might be writing a paper about someone who interests you or an issue that interests you and now, you can kind of … You have that outlet as opposed to just kind of keeping it in or telling one or two people. But now you can write about it in a class, that’s an academic class. That you can just see that it was something that they had missed in their education process. (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview)

Mr. Jones envisioned how he could sanction the production of text in history class as an “outlet” for students to “work on things that aren’t open” (Mr. Jones, Exit Interview).

Likewise, Ms. Wright recorded an extensive list of texts for student consumption that
would be “eye opening” for her students, in terms of queer visibility (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). The Discourse of visibility, a queer sensibility, was conveyed to teachers in the study by student participants from the outside in.

**What does it mean to be queer?** During meetings of the Curriculum Design Team, student participants addressed Discourses that non-normative sexuality and gender fluidity are morally, naturally, and spiritually wrong. They also attempted to flesh out what it means to be queer, both for themselves and for the teachers. They explored sexual activity as a component of sexuality and gender, as well as conceptions of the queer community as both powerless victims and powerful agents. Much of their work in Curriculum Design Team meetings involved dialogue advocating that difference should be celebrated instead of denigrated.

Students in the study ruminated about rules for being in the queer community. When Aria suggested a prompt about queering a character from a novel, Daisy sagely offered an example: “I even think about what if Hester Prynne was a man, what would they do to her?” (CDT#3_LA) Ms. Wright attempted to capture the question, speaking as she typed.

Ms. Wright: Using one of the books, we'd say, ‘How do you think the character's life would have been different if he or she had been queer?’ Do you put queer in quotes? Or just no quotes?

Leah: No quotes.

Aria: I kind of like to do the all caps. I don't know why.

Daisy: QUEER!
Leah: I like to go into Word art and then just make it really purple…

Ms. Wright: And flowery. (CDT#3_LA)

Participants in this exchange attempted to determine the rules for spelling *queer* through improvisation. It’s one of the rare times Ms. Wright joined in improvisation, and her two-word contribution expanded an already queer spelling of *queer*. Participants’ usage and spelling of *queer* implied destigmatization, pride, rebellion, beauty, and difference. When Anita Bryant proclaimed she was part of the “Normal Majority” (as seen in *Milk*, 2008, Van Sant), students in the study might not disagree, although they would trouble the word *normal*. However, they did constantly contest the idea that queer means wrong, taking up Discourses in that vein from movies, TV shows, books, and websites.

Students also troubled Discourses about how a person becomes gay or gender queer. During a meeting of the language arts group, Daisy mentioned, “I’ve heard a lot of more homophobic people say that in middle school, people from (an LGBT advocacy organization) came to talk about gay issues and they're like, ‘Oh, they're trying to convert me to be gay’ and stuff like that” (CDT#2_LA). Aria and Willow couldn’t resist enacting a funny script.

Aria: Here I am.

Willow: I’ve come for you. (laughter)

Ms. Wright: That easy, huh? (CDT#2_LA)

Not only do Daisy, Willow, Aria, and Ms. Wright trouble the Discourse about queer adults recruiting children, they also raise questions about how someone feels same-sex attraction or feels trapped in the wrong body. In *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008), Harvey Milk wonders if homosexuality can be taught to children, just like the French language. In
Luna (2004), a book Leah strongly recommended, Peters proposes that while culture shapes gender roles, the protagonist of her story did not choose her internal gender. At birth, Liam was designated a boy, even though her gender was “hardwired into his brain…the way intelligence or memory is” (ch. 6, para. 31). Liam was girl by nature, boy by nurture. In a social studies meeting, Kate mentioned she follows a video blog, or vlog, called Lesbian Answers. In an episode entitled, “The Truth about Lesbians” (2013, June 9) Jenna Anne asserts that lesbians cannot be “cured” of their sexuality. According to Leah, “It’s a biological thing” (CDT#2_LA). Daisy says people “don’t choose to be that way” (CDT#2_LA). Being queer, in many ways, is innate.

In spite of promoting Discourse about the biological implications of gender, sex, and sexuality, students also asserted that gender and sexuality are fluid. The social studies group talked about the Kinsey scale, which portrays sexuality as a point along a continuum (The Kinsey Institute), and the Klein Grid (Clark, 2014), which posits sexuality is fluid, based on many variables. Mr. Jones, who teaches a course on human diversity, described a noteworthy activity for his class, which inspired a conversation on gender fluidity.

Mr. Jones: Just what, well, I'm trying to get guest speakers to come in and just talk about experience, experiences. One of the things that we'll get into is the Klein spectrum. Have you ever heard of what it is?

Kate: The spectrum as in like the male-female [crosstalk 00:36:40] that kind of thing?

Mr. Jones: Yes.

Kate: You find your plot.
Mr. Jones: Yeah, so the Klein, I can't remember. [crosstalk 00:36:48]

Beatrix: So it's like the non-Kinsey scale, but better. [crosstalk 00:36:51]

Casey: The Kinsey scale is fun. (laughs)

Beatrix: The Kinsey scale is interesting, but it does also conform to the binary.
[crosstalk 00:37:01]

Mr. Jones: Yeah, and then you're ... Right.

Casey: It's a good starting point, is basically the Kinsey scale.

Beatrix: Yeah, and it's like: ‘I am going right here,” wherever you are.

Mr. Jones: Right, and that's where I think even for me, just discussing
surrounding those ideas of...

Casey: A lot of people don't get that it's a spectrum. They see it's very binary. It's
like male-female.

Kate: Very few. I maybe can argue zero people.

Mr. Jones: Or 100% [crosstalk 00:37:33]

Beatrix: Even there, you could talk about, how people who define themselves are
male are more likely to be... View it as a binary thing.

Mr. Jones: Mm-hm (affirmative).

Casey: Oh, that's interesting.

Beatrix: I was reading something where ... I was going to (an international
conference), where they were talking about gender. It was called, “56 Different
Points on the Gender Spectrum.” Somebody said: “Women are much more likely
to see things on a scale than men are.”

Kate: I wonder why.
Mr. Jones: To fill that gray area.

Casey: I think it's partly biology.

Mr. Jones: Some of it's biology, but some of it's socially…

Beatrix: I feel it could just be the culture.

Casey: I think it's upbringing, and also probably at least part it is biology.

The social studies group not only explored cultural and biological aspects of fluidity, but also tried to ascribe cultural and biological causes to people’s perceptions of sexuality and gender. The excerpt shows the role of Mr. Jones as engaged participant in the dialogue, offering his own informed perceptions; however, the entire conversation was initiated by student participants, who asked several thoughtful questions about the diversity curriculum. Student participants not only shared their knowledge of fluidity, but also referred to sources of information, like the prominent conference Beatrix attended.

Discourses surrounding fluidity of gender and sexuality are complex, especially when people are provided with the simplicity and pervasiveness of the heteronormative model that constructs our identities. Students in the study relied on outside resources, as well as dialogue in G.S.A., to participate in Discourses about queer identities.

The language arts group took up identity as a theme for its writing assignment. Specifically, they examined the idea whether identity is individually or socially constructed. Daisy had a hard time with identity being constructed for her. She believed identity – like her sexuality, for example – was innate:

Daisy: I don't know about the whole what shapes your identity thing.

Aria: I like that. Because we're studying behaviorists (sic) right now and my mom's a behaviorist (sic), what shapes your identity, when we talked about the
first day I was here or whatever it was called, the whole how you change your façade, I guess. What was that word?

Willow: Discourse?

Aria: Discourse. What shapes your identity, obviously you have your own identity, but the way you show yourself and everything or your culture and the things around you. I think that’s especially important in the queer community. Who you are as a person, but then also what shapes you into that person, based on what you’ve been through in your life and also just based on the community?

Daisy: Just the gay identity. I feel like it does shape you but you don't choose to be that way. That’s part of your identity.

Aria: In turn of being a part of that community, you're influenced and shaped by it. Even though it's not what shapes you, then by being a part of it, you are shaped.

Leah: And how do you shape it? How do you shape those around you?

Aria: Just historically, look at the way that mostly just lesbian and gay men portray themselves in a certain way. It's a historical thing and it's become a cultural thing that lesbians cut their hair off and they have a right ear piercing and a right eyebrow piercing. It's a way of showing people. It was more of a historical thing just to be safe with the whole gay man, this thing (gesturing), that’s a signal. This is a signal for, I'm gay. Things like that, it started off as ways to be safe and show who you are and now they’ve just become part of our culture. That’s another thing. Once you're in the culture, you're shaped by that. (CDT#2_LA)

I was surprised but proud to listen to the audio recording later and hear the Aria and Willow take up Discourse, based on our reading from Gee (2010) during our students-
only meeting a few weeks earlier. Aria made a case to Ms. Wright and to her peers that identity is a social construct, and people’s perceptions and performances are products of culture. Like the character in the young adult novel, *Every Day* (Levithan, 2012), we have to figure out who we are each day, based on the information around us. Ms. Wright had shared a chapter from *Every Day* (Levithan, 2012) earlier in the school year, as a prompt for a writing invitation. Leah and Daisy saw the book as essential for the writing assignment they were developing with the language arts group.

Daisy affirmed and troubled Aria’s portrayal of identity construction when she offered an example about her sexuality: “Or like especially teenagers will shape their identity around what their parents teach them or show them. I'm supposed to be straight because I was born out of a straight relationship” (Daisy, CDT#3_LA). Daisy implies that norms influence performance of sexuality; however, Daisy is bisexual, unlike her parents, so her identity isn’t derived strictly from culture. *Milk* (Van Sant, 2008) offers a similar analogy with schoolteachers, when the character of Harvey wonders why more students aren’t nuns, since they were taught by nuns. Later, Daisy takes up culture’s role in identity construction, suggesting the writing assignment might include a question like, “How does the media and pop culture shape our identity?” (Daisy, CDT#3_LA) What is stunning about the transcripts of the language arts group is how students stitch together various Discourses, including our discussion about Discourse, to articulate complex ideas about identity.

Many of the resources cited by students contain the Discourse that being queer equates to being a victim. Visibility is achieved through tragic narratives. *Valentine Road* (Cunningham, 2103) and *Bridegroom* (Bloodworth-Tomason, 2013) conflate death and
homophobia. Narratives about AIDS loomed large for student participants, with movies like *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993) and *Dallas Buyers Club* (Vallée, 2013), as well as documentaries like *We Were Here* (Weissman, 2011) and *How to Survive a Plague* (France, 2012), depicting individual and national responses to a major health crisis.

Discourses dealing with discrimination, morality, community, family, and courage are bound up in these films, all of which were recommended by student participants. In an effort to inform as well as cultivate empathy from audiences, these films depict the tragic aspects of being queer.

The language arts group talked about ensuring the writing assignment was inclusive, but Discourses about inclusivity meant more than gender and sexuality. Inclusivity also included numerous issues facing the queer community. “A lot of times, when we talk about gay issues in school, we go right for gay men,” Aria explained. “That’s what I’ve noticed over the years. There's a lot of voices who aren't heard throughout and a lot of issues that aren't talked about” (Aria, CDT#2_LA). For Aria, the queer community is sprawling, but the issues facing it are not: “It's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transitioning, queer. There's the drug use part of it, there's the suicide part of it, there's the disease part of it” (Aria, CDT#2_LA). But the issues she cites as characteristic of the queer community – drug and alcohol abuse, mental health, and disease – depict queers almost exclusively as victims. Culled from films laced with tragedy as well as their own personal experiences, victimization Discourses were conveyed to – and sometimes critiqued for – teachers in support of students’ efforts to characterize as well as understand what it means to be queer.

*We are all the same.* A common sense of humanity was a significant Discourse
that students conveyed to teachers during Curriculum Design Team meetings. “Everyone knows gay people want to get married,” Willow said. “But then does everyone know, how does a gay person feel on a day-to-day basis?” (CDT#2_LA) Gee (2012) talks about the role of language in building solidarity among people. Syntax and semantics can divide or unite. As a means to unite, the social studies group focused on the founding principle that all people are created equal – a Discourse that is quoted directly from the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia (Demme, 1993) and Milk (Van Sant, 2008). Students argued that bisexual people have the same rights as straight people. Rights apply equally to all and are alien to none, which is inherent in each person’s humanity. And if citizens of a country can accept that principle without qualification, they might also be able to accept, like the Depeche Mode song, that “people are people” (Daisy, CDT#2_combined). Students felt their peers could cultivate acceptance through reading and discussing a book like Will Grayson, Will Grayson (Green & Levithan, 2010), with “really relatable characters and some of them happen to be gay, which is great” (Willow, CDT#2_LA). The whole point of studying the Civil Rights Movement or watching a documentary might be to try to get past an “us-versus-them” mentality (Aria, CDT#2_LA). In watching Bridegroom (Bloodworth-Tomason, 2013), a documentary about a gay man who has no rights regarding visitation, medical care, and burial after his partner falls off a roof, Ms. Wright couldn’t help but focusing on her own life and her own family:

Actually as I was watching I was thinking, “What if this was my fiancé? What if he walked off of roof and I never got to see him or say goodbye?” And I thought it did an amazing job of… all these people were saying is, if there were ever two
people in the world in love, it was these two. (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview)

In hearing and discussing stories, whether historical or fictional, students felt Discourses that divide people could be confronted, analyzed, disrupted, and reframed. Willow summed up the work of the Curriculum Design Team when she said:

So we’re coming down to the idea that everyone is a person and we're all people. Humanizing the whole thing. That’s what will really make an impact on students. Because if we're, this is this whole culture that’s so different from you, it's like, well that’s interesting, I guess. But, here's people just like you and there's this fact about them that’s different, but they're still have this identity and they're still people. That’s what's going to make an impact in someone's life and maybe becoming more accepting, which is out ultimate goal, right? (CDT#3_LA)

**Chapter Conclusion**

At our final meeting, I wondered if Coolidge grads (Kate, Aria, and Leah) would be willing to come back and present findings to the Coolidge staff. Aria and Leah, who led a revival of the Gay-Straight Alliance at Coolidge, had been looking ahead to college as their last few weeks of school ticked away, wondering if they would truly leave Coolidge behind. “We’ll come to G.S.A. every week,” Aria joked. “We’ll be back to Diversity Panel probably,” Leah ventured. Willow told Aria and Leah they had to visit after graduation to impart their “gay knowledge” to “all the little freshmen.” Aria imagined a scenario where “(We) come back in, we walk in the school. We open the doors. It’s a rainbow. ‘We’re back!’” (CDT#3) By imagining how their return would “open the doors” and let in a rainbow of their queer knowledge, fun, and empowerment, Aria not only commented on their senior status as a queer resource at Coolidge, but also
cast doubts on the ability of Coolidge to go forward without them. Who would mentor the freshmen? Who would tutor the teachers? Woven into this liberating scenario is the idea that institutional knowledge can be dark, stagnant, and dreary, unless disruptive, playful, and affirming Discourses come from the outside in.

In order to mediate Discourses about sexuality and gender, teachers need help in making sense of dominant and marginalized Discourses. Thein (2013), Blackburn (2012), and Clark (2010) define the crucial need for teachers to engage in ongoing, supported examination and analysis of Discourses that marginalize and empower queer students and their straight counterparts. While literacy education courses and teacher inservice days can offer opportunities for teachers to reimagine curricula, ultimately teachers may have to resort to the same resources that students in the study relied upon for their self-guided education: online videos, young adult literature, documentaries, and texts from small publishing houses. So teachers don’t experience the same feeling their students experience as they read and view texts in a lonely quest to find themselves, teachers must reach out to their students to make combating homophobia and contesting heteronormativity a collective enterprise, one that fosters agency in a classroom of learners.
Conclusion

I again turn to Britzman (1995) who asks, “What is required to refuse the unremarked and obdurately unremarkable straight educational curriculum?” (p. 151) This study sought to discover what would transpire when students from a G.S.A. collaborated with high school teachers to construct writing assignments that included queer issues and identities. Discussions about gender and sexuality can be challenging in any environment, but worth having. In schools, teachers like Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones may have limited opportunities to discuss with colleagues how gender and sexuality can materialize in curriculum. In addition, teachers may feel like they can’t or don’t know how to describe aspects of non-normative sexuality and gender to their students (Thein, 2013). They may not believe their students are mature enough or receptive enough to engage in complex discussions about queer issues and identities. And yet, like Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones, teachers may be willing to engage in these complex conversations with their students and colleagues. Discussions about curricular inclusion of sexuality and gender were the focal point of this study, when seven students and two teachers gamely met together in spring 2015 to collaborate on more inclusive writing assignments. The findings of this study have implications for researchers, teacher educators, preservice teachers, and inservice teachers.

Mediating Choice

In clever and disruptive ways, the Curriculum Design Team found space in literacy curricula for queer issues and identities. Their collaborative work directly addressed my first research question, which asked, How do members of the Curriculum Design Team (e.g., queer youth, allies, and teachers) understand the role of high school
writing assignments in contributing to the construction and performance of gender and sexuality? Students in this study said they appreciated opportunities to read and produce texts in school that explored queer identities and issues, although the opportunities were scarce. They sometimes capitalized on writing assignments where they could explore topics such as same-sex marriage, gender fluidity, or the meaning of family. So that young people in schools can “see themselves reflected back in a positive manner” (Miller, 2015, p. 40), students in this study recommended choice of texts to produce and consume as a way to pry open curriculum for queer issues and identities. For Moses (2002), choice is crucial for developing autonomy among people who are oppressed. Drawing on a contemporary liberal philosophical framework, Moses (2002) proposes education policies that promote “a favorable context of choice” as a means to put students on “the path to autonomy” (p. 22). For students in this study, choice mitigated issues around curriculum, such as accusations of indoctrination, so that no one would be forced against their will to read a book with a queer character or examine social movements that promoted gay rights.

When Moses (2002) describes “a favorable context of choice” (p. 22), she argues, like the students in this study, that choice is socially situated. To achieve favorable conditions for developing autonomy, teachers must negotiate between “individual choices and community context” (p. 24). Students in this study complicated unmediated choice as problematic: straight students might write stories that essentialize queer people or they might exercise their legal and consumer privileges to avoid sexuality and gender altogether. Aria, for example, wanted teachers to “teach it a little bit” (CDT#1) so that students would be more willing to venture into texts and topics they knew or cared little about. “Teach a little bit” was positioned by students primarily as facilitating dialogue
around texts that students produced and consumed. Introducing documentaries or young adult novels as options allowed teachers to relinquish their role as authorities, when students sought to explore queer issues and examine queer performances outside the literary canon. The writing assignments designed by students and teachers in this study utilized choice and modeling as a means to foster visibility and accessibility of non-normative performances of gender and sexuality, which was the essence of my third research question.

While many teachers, including Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones, are mostly amenable to including queer issues and identities in their curricula, they don’t always know how. “Teach it a little bit” is challenging for teachers who have great intentions: both Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright worried about not using “correct” language about gender and sexuality in their instruction. Miller (2015) suggests that teachers must “help to unpack the complexities of language” (p. 40) around a gender-sexuality continuum, which implies that students are doing some of the unpacking themselves. My second research question asks, What Discourses and identities emerge as participants collaborate to develop writing assignments that explore gender and sexuality? In this study, students collaborated with teachers in the process of unpacking language around curriculum, especially as it pertained to Discourses around gender and sexuality. Students performed roles as knowledge authorities, mediating dominant and marginalized Discourses for Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright. The second results chapter of this study clearly shows how students mediated Discourses, as well as what Discourses they felt compelled to mediate.

Findings from this study suggest that discussions about a continuum of sexuality and gender must extend beyond K-12 staff meetings, teacher education courses, and even
K-12 and college classrooms, to include student voices in the construction (and not just enactment) of curriculum. In collaborating with students, rather than advocating for them, teachers open up the possibility for ongoing dialogue, especially as they find the ground shifting under them as Discourses about gender and sexuality continue to evolve. The roles taken by participants in this study troubled what it means for a teacher to be an ally, and further, called into question just who is an ally when students and teachers engage in ongoing, productive dialogue about sexuality and gender.

**Troubling the Term Ally**

Discourses surrounding the term *ally* must be troubled if educators are going to effectively engage queer and straight students alike in dialogue about gender and sexuality. Definitions and explanations of what it means to be an ally point to straight, cisgender people as powerful agents in combating discrimination against queer people. According to GLAAD (2007), “Allies are some of the most effective and powerful voices of the LGBT movement. Not only do allies help people in the coming-out process, they also help others understand the importance of equality, fairness, acceptance and mutual respect” (para. 4). Unfortunately, queer people in general are often positioned by ally Discourses as victims in need of help.

Jennings (1999) troubles binary conceptions of ally when roles are framed, not as ally/enemy, but as ally/neutral. In schools, ally/neutral might mean a teacher can choose to disrupt heteronormativity and homophobia, or a teacher can choose to stay neutral by not saying or doing anything. For example, a Safe Zone sticker on a teacher’s door, or the absence of a Safe Zone sticker, might communicate a piece of environmental data to a new student trying to read their school. A pattern of behavior sends a clearer message,
since students pay close attention to what their teachers say and do. Neutrality, by virtue of silence and inaction, equates taking a stance against queer people. Clark (2010) contends that allies who focus only on individual acts of discrimination rather than systemic discrimination may be taking “a neutral, apolitical stance in disguise” (pp. 711-712). Ally/enemy might be easier to conceptualize than ally/neutral, but the neutrality stance might be more insidious. There is power in not acting. There is power in not contesting systemic Discourses.

What could acting look like for allies of the queer community? Teachers who employ Miller’s (2015) Queer Literacy Framework (p. 42) will step into a much more expansive conception of ally. Among the ten principles Miller (2015) offers, one most resembles commonly circulated ally Discourses (like GLAAD’s definition): “Advocates for equity across all categories of (a)gender and (a)sexuality orientations” (p. 42).

Advocating on behalf of the “powerless” queer community is a common exhortation among allies. Miller qualifies the advocacy in two important ways: first, by extending the advocacy to include a much broader conceptions of (a)gender and (a)sexuality; and two, the nine other principles (see Table 12) contain actions that call for reflexivity in terms of intersectionality, normativity, and fluidity. Teachers in this study were not allies because they were advocating for queer youth among homophobic friends, neighbors, and colleagues; instead, Ms. Wright and Mr. Jones engaged with students in reflective, curious, critical, and generative ways.

Table 12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principles from “A Queer Literacy Framework Promoting (A)Gender and (A)Sexuality Self-Determination and Justice” (Miller, 2015, p. 42).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Refrains from possible presumptions that students are heterosexual or ascribe to a gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Understands gender as a construct that has and continues to be affected by intersecting factors (e.g.,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3. Recognizes that masculinity and femininity constructs are assigned to gender norms and are situationally performed

4. Understands gender and sexuality as flexible

5. Opens up spaces for students to self-define with chosen (a)genders, (a)sexuality, (a)pronouns, or names

6. Engages in ongoing critique of how gender norms are reinforced in literature, media, technology, art, history, science, math, etc.

7. Understands how Neoliberal principles reinforce and sustain compulsory heterosexism, which secures homophobia; how gendering secures bullying and transphobia; and how homonormativity placates a heterosexual political economy

8. Understands that (a)gender and (a)sexuality intersect with other identities (e.g., culture, language, age, religion, social class, body type, accent, height, ability, disability, national origin) that inform students’ beliefs and, thereby, actions

9. Advocates for equity across all categories of (a)gender and (a)sexuality orientations

10. Believes that students who identify on a continuum of gender and sexual minorities (GSM) deserve to learn in environments free of bullying and harassment

Another way to trouble ally, if indeed the term connotes power, is to try to determine how power travels through certain Discourses. Discourses about the agency of youth have been abridged to a binary of empowered and powerless. Tropes about adolescents, developed by sociologists in the early 20th century, add to Discourses positioning queer youth as helpless and in a constant state of turmoil. Adolescence, according to Talburt (2004), has been pathologized as a finite period of turmoil, pain, stress, and growth that hopefully leads to stable, mature adulthood. The narrative of youth as powerless actors on the road to becoming adults is worth exploring. Talburt (2004) writes, “Adults position youth as essentially passive actors in a narrative of adult design” (p.23). By including students as agents in the development of curriculum, this study contested the “narrative of adult design” that plays out in schools. This study shows
agency not as belonging solely to students or to teachers, but instead resulting from collaboration and dialogue among teachers and students.

The queer community is not immune to its own portrayals of queer youth as passive, powerless victims at the mercy of a cruel social order. Critique (Doyle, 2010; Grisham, 2012) has been leveled at video posts on the It Gets Better Web site, because the narrative arc established by adults for an audience of queer teens is that you might have to suffer through middle and high school (since no one has the power to change things now), but when you graduate, you can move wherever you want (if you are white) and start a happy life, free of homophobia. My own study (Wenk, 2013) of videos posted by queer youth on It Gets Better found that the adult narrative fell apart when queer youth tried to mimic adult posts. The desired or ideal state – living contentedly queer – was not realized by queer youth, nor was it coherently communicated as part of youth narratives posted on It Gets Better. The videos posted by adults portray a state of being that is not real or realistic. Video posts by adults on It Gets Better don’t generally acknowledge, as Talburt (2004) writes, that human lives are enmeshed in “continual states of becoming” (p. 35). According to Chodron (1999), our lives are always in flux, whether we are young or old, a condition we have a hard time appreciating.

Data from this study positions adult participants (including me) as allies who are in a state of becoming, in the same way as students in the study are classified by society as being in a state of becoming. Mr. Jones placed himself in a state of becoming when he stated, “One of the reasons I wanted to be a part of the Curriculum Design Team (was) to

---

3 According to the Web site, where people post videos to encourage queer youth to persevere through difficult times, “The It Gets Better Project's mission is to communicate to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth around the world that it gets better, and to create and inspire the changes needed to make it better for them” (para. 1). The site was founded in 2010 in response to a cluster of teen suicides across the nation.
be more available and know that I am working on trying to be an ally” (Mr. Jones, Preliminary Interview). Feeling vulnerable, rather than always powerfully efficacious, may be vital to being an ally to queer youth. For example, even though he teaches the school’s diversity class, making him somewhat of an expert, Mr. Jones acknowledged feeling vulnerable regarding his grasp of queer issues:

I don't know how to say this. I don't necessarily think that I've been the best with it (queer issues), so to speak, but definitely wanting to be – politically correct isn’t the right word – but sensitive to the issues and sensitive to what other people are dealing with… what's going on in their world and wanting to know more about it.

(Mr. Jones, Preliminary Interview)

During meetings of the Curriculum Design Team, neither Mr. Jones nor Ms. Wright pretended to have all the answers, but they were still willing to engage in critical dialogue with knowledgeable and agentive students.

Being an educator-ally might mean being ready and being open to what our students share with us. Sometimes, students in schools readily volunteer their knowledge; sometimes, as teachers know, they have to be invited. Invitation is a strategy recommended by Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (2007) for allies who want to learn from members of the queer community:

You can ask—in fact, the best thing to do is ask. One of the best ways that you can demonstrate your interest in being an ally is to get—and stay—informed. Ask questions, do research, and be honest about what you want to know. Our GLBT friends, neighbors, and coworkers are not so different from us, but there are
differences that you need to understand so you can help others get on the same page. (p. 7)

PFLAG is not recommending a middle school teacher call on a 7th grader in class for explanations of queer desire; instead, educators could tune into Discourses students circulate in school hallways, or solicit an invitation to attend a G.S.A. meeting, or show genuine interest in what students are reading and writing outside of school. Becoming an ally might never entail intervening in a playground case of bullying, what Clark (2010) calls “anti-work” (p.711); instead, it might require teachers to raise their antennae as a way to perceive faint Discourses transmitted by queer youth, since meaning making is discursive.

**Refining Curricular Standpoint Theory**

This study sought to eliminate some of the guesswork involved for teachers who are trying to implement critical pedagogies that will foster visibility and accessibility of non-normative performances of gender and sexuality. Drawing on Marxist and feminist theories, Au (2012) advocates for curricular standpoint as a means to inform curricular theory and practice. Au (2012) contends that knowledge is socially located:

That is to say, our social locations both enable us to see and understand the world more clearly with respect to our positionality *and* make our ability to understand world beyond that same positionality more difficult. However, it is critical to acknowledge that making this point does not mean that one cannot understand someone else’s socially located epistemology. Rather, the point is to say that the socially located epistemologies of others may be more difficult to grasp and
wouldn’t necessarily be a part of one’s commonsense understanding of the world.

(p. 54; italics original)

With a “ruler’s view of the world” (Au, 2012, p. 54), teachers may have difficulty understanding the views of the ruled, their students – particularly students who are oppressed along the lines of sexuality, gender, class, and culture, and particularly as bodies “invent new knowledges” (Miller, 2015, p. 39). Inquiry into curriculum starts, according to Au (2012), with power relations. While power relations served as an important framework for this study, the concept manifested itself through our work, rather than manifesting an ephemeral, abstract presence in teacher-designed lessons.

Standpoint theory must evolve from developing curriculum that is imposed on students to developing curriculum in collaboration with students, especially given the limits teachers in this study articulated when it comes to queer issues and identities. Miller (2015) asks, “How can we support preservice and inservice literacy teachers to develop and embody the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn (NCATE) while simultaneously supporting them to remain open to redefinition and renegotiation when they come up against social limits?” (p. 37) Preservice and inservice teachers might begin by acknowledging their own intellectual shortcomings where queer issues and identities are concerned. Teachers in this study became aware of curricular hegemony (via silences and erasure) in relation to gender and sexuality in dialogue with students during the first meeting of the Curriculum Design Team. They also acknowledged that without students, they might have been at a loss for how to represent non-normative gender and sexuality. During the study, Ms. Wright acknowledged the difficulty of grasping issues of gender and sexuality that weren’t part of her
commonsense (heteronormative) perceptions of the world. She said, “I could not identify with a lot of what they were saying, but I learned from it, and so liked that role” (Ms. Wright, Post-Study Interview). To help Ms. Wright continue her education beyond meetings, students supplied her with a list of resources to investigate.

Mr. Jones also admitted he struggled to understand the experiences and issues of queer people, specifically the transgender community, even though his instruction embodied curricular standpoint theory:

> Really in my effort to attempt to put myself in the shoes of someone who is transgender so that I can answer those questions, and just at least help along the way. Like I tell my students ... I don't know all the answers. I'm not a person who is dealing with this but I've read and listened to and heard enough about it that I can give you some answers. (Mr. Jones, Preliminary Interview)

For Mr. Jones and Ms. Wright, building inclusive and critical writing assignments, on their own, was a very challenging aspect of being an ally for queer youth.

While Au (2012) links curriculum to hegemony, his vision of curricular reflexivity places design and implementation solely with the teacher. Au (2012) writes,

> For the teacher… the curriculum itself is a tool that they are using to structure classroom environments that leverage certain forms of consciousness amongst students; for students the actual content of the curriculum (activities, projects, foci of study) is a tool with which they actively engage with their educational curricular environments. (p. 67)

Narratives about curriculum, like Au’s, portray schools as places where teachers produce and implement curriculum (except when it is given to them), and students enact the
content of curriculum (except when they resist performing assignments and activities). Data generated by this study troubles the curricular binary of teacher as producer and student as consumer, and offers another way to cultivate curricular standpoint. Without much preparation in curriculum development but with outsider knowledge, students in this study were able to collaborate with teachers, over a five-hour period, to develop writing assignments that they felt were more inclusive of queer themes and topics. They also were able to recommend instructional practices, such as choice and modeling, that they felt would reduce inhibitions and mitigate community reservations about addressing queer issues and identities in the classroom.

The practice of involving students in designing curricula that fosters critical perspectives is rare, even when it seems like it would make eminent sense. For example, Logan, Lasswell, Hood, and Watson (2015) invite teachers to consider criteria for selecting queer young adults novels for their students to read. Through their extensive research of multicultural literature reviews and queer literature, they established nine criteria for selection of queer young adult literature: curriculum relevance; literary merit; windows and mirrors (to cultivate appreciation of difference as well as reflection on one’s identities); social justice and equity; stereotypes; pride, resiliency, and self-actualization; sexual expressiveness; and disrupting heterosexism, homophobia, and heteronormativity. If a librarian needed to shop for queer YA novels for the library, or a teacher wanted to select a novel for the class to read together, this set of criteria would undoubtedly be helpful. If a teacher just wanted to assist an individual student with something to read, the suggested titles in the article by Logan at al. (2015) would be a
wonderful starting point. In terms of inspiring dialogue among educators, the criteria would also be very useful.

Missing in the article by Logan et al. (2015), however, is one seemingly obvious criterion: what do students like to read? Their selection criteria may fall apart, especially in terms of adult perceptions of curricular relevance and literary merit, when a student like Leah reads all of the books written by Julie Anne Peters because the books shed light on her identities. When I utilized reading workshop in the late 1990’s, my students were constantly recommending books to me and to each other. Today, as students share books and recommend titles, they may not use the same criteria that adults use. And, in 2015, sharing and recommending as a literacy practice extends far beyond novels. Novels now represent a narrow band of literacy consumed and produced by students. The selection criteria developed by Logan et al. (2015) not only ignore what students might value in young adult literature, but they also promote an autonomous brand of literacy where books reign supreme, while blogs, videos, documentaries, and films remain unsanctioned in school curriculum. Without student mediation of resources that include non-normative and contested Discourses, teachers in this study might have remained unaware of an expansive range of texts that students in their classes might consume and produce, as well as unaware of Discourses that impact performance possibilities for queer students.

Teacher agency in the 21st century, amid major political reforms and widespread access to information, must be nurtured through relationships with other educational stakeholders, particularly students. Mehta (2012) and Cuban (2013) encourage education reformers to focus on the classroom, where the relationship among teacher/student/content acts as the fulcrum of complex educational systems. Interpreting
content standards is important work among teachers today, but implementing content standards should include student voices, so that curriculum is not done uniformly to a diverse student population. To include literacies consumed and produced by students (outside of the school day) would be a reasonable step, for example, in cultivating curricular standpoint in a classroom, especially in light of how teachers and students might be able to collaboratively mediate messages contained in a documentary like *For the Bible Tells Me So* (Karslake, 2007). Letting teachers arbitrate content alone or letting students arbitrate content alone is no longer tenable. Reading and writing assignments truly need to be dialogic, in the classroom and with the world.

**Discursive Ecologies and Queer Youth**

As described in my methods section, student voices were central to what data was collected, as well as to how data was collected. This study could have analyzed curriculum for its perceived marginalization of queer issues and identities. This study also could have focused on teacher perceptions of curricular inclusivity. Either approach might have yielded useful data, but in my opinion, not the right data. Where a researcher’s gaze settles influences how a phenomenon is measured. For example, biologists studying ecosystems turn to certain species, like the cutthroat trout, to measure changes in air, soil, or water quality. The cutthroat trout produces *heat shock protein* in response to an increase in water temperature. Biologists can often trace the production of this protein, a response to thermal stress, back to human causes, such as grazing or logging activities. In this way, the cutthroat trout serves as a bioindicator: through its response to stress, the trout’s condition tells biologists about the quality of coldwater streams. The trout may be a more sensitive instrument to measure water quality than a
sophisticated thermometer. “Despite many technological advances,” write Holt and Miller (2010), “we find ourselves turning to the biota of natural ecosystems to tell us the story of our world” (para. 1).

People can serve as bioindicators of their environments, too. The National School Climate Surveys, conducted biannually by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network since 1999, serves as a biomonitoring tool for educators interested in the environmental stress queer students report. Fortunately, the survey’s indicators, which include questions about bullying and harassment (see the introduction to this dissertation), show positive trends for queer youth in schools. Media reports about suicides among queer youth can also serve as data about environmental health. In 2010, several suicides by queer teens, among them Tyler Clementi of Rutgers University, received widespread media attention, highlighting the consequences of environmental stress for queer teens. In addition, TV shows, movies, documentaries, and pop music can be considered measures of the discursive spaces that queer youth swim in. Queer people have been represented more frequently (although not always in positive or nuanced ways) in media over the past twenty years (Villarejo, 2007). Finally, laws and policies protecting queer youth from harassment and bullying have multiplied since 2000, so that now 49 states have anti-bullying laws on the books (Blad, 2015). Stress, as measured from the people who experience it, can provide valuable information for researchers about the environment teachers and their queer students live and work in. Queer youth in this study described Coolidge High School as progressive in its acceptance of non-normative sexuality and gender, but also said that acceptance didn’t translate into inclusive curriculum.
Teachers, like queer youth, are not immune to stress from homophobic and heteronormative Discourses, a phenomena worth additional investigation. Thein’s (2013) study about the Discourses of literacy teachers, referenced as part of the Literature Review, indicates the nature of stress teachers reported when presented with the option of teaching queer texts in their courses. Thein (2013) focuses on the individual agency of teachers, whom she says “could not or would not” (p. 170) include queer texts and issues in their curriculum. In spite of their “positive, sympathetic views toward LGBT students and issues” (p. 169), Thein says teachers in her study chose instead to draw on “discourses of equality, fairness, appropriateness, and legality” (p. 176) to justify exclusion of queer texts and issues. Since teachers draw upon “patterned discourses and rhetorical arguments that serve to silence productive dialogue” (p. 177), Thein (2013) suggests teacher educators work with teachers to interrogate the logic of their Discourses. An important step for teacher educators to take, she suggests, is helping teachers explore how their discursive moves are situated within dominant Discourses about gender and sexuality. Turning their gaze on dominant Discourses, as well as their own rhetorical moves, might allow teachers to truly understand the legal rights of parents, for example, in dictating curriculum. It’s not enough for teacher educators to dismiss certain Discourses as “unproductive” (Thein, 2013, p. 179). It’s a subtle shift, but one that reveals not only the discursive health of individual teachers, but also useful information about the environment teachers live and work in.

Agency demonstrated by students in this study can be traced to their environment. Students described the influence of friends and families, as well as affirming Discourses culled from queer resources. Queer students aren’t always victims whose bodies are
withering under extreme stress (see also Rofes, 2004). This study uncovered resilience, a sense of optimism, and a productive critical perspective among queer teens (and their ally, Kate). Harassment of queer youth does happen, all too frequently; students in this study told stories of homophobia and the personal consequences they endured. However, the results of this study also showed student participants are thriving in many ways, in spite of environmental stresses. In a time of proliferating measures of student achievement, multiple measures are needed to determine the health of our students, our schools, and our society. Discourses worth disrupting and contesting must be identified, and this study identifies compelling Discourses about school, curriculum, sexuality, and gender through dialogue among teachers and students. “I thought it was interesting,” Daisy said, “that the data collection for this study was just talking and discussing and creating, mostly” (Daisy, Exit Interview). This study implemented a democratic process by which queer youth and their allies, through “talking and discussing and creating,” identified, transformed, and contested curricular Discourses over the course of three meetings of the Curriculum Design Team.

**Queer Youth Attunement: Dialed into Different Frequencies**

The two teachers in this study found informed conversational partners in students. Ms. Wright described her interactions with students “genuine” (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). At the same time, she doubted conversations about gender, sexuality, and curriculum among her colleagues would have been as positive or productive. She portrayed teachers in general as “reserved” when it comes to topics of gender and sexuality, particularly queer teachers (Ms. Wright, Exit Interview). She wondered how her colleagues at Coolidge might receive the writing assignment she constructed with
students. Teachers would want to see evidence, she guessed, that queer issues could effectively (and perhaps non-controversially) be incorporated into curriculum. Students, on the other hand, brought more optimism to the task of queering curriculum.

For Mr. Jones, conversations about gender and sexuality largely occurred in his classroom with students or at home with his opposite-sex partner. Mr. Jones said he talked about “the gamut of diversity” with his girlfriend, who had taken classes about gender and sexuality and worked in a field that supports members of the queer community (Mr. Jones, Preliminary Interview). Since many students in his classes didn’t have a grasp of issues in the queer community, Mr. Jones worked as a sense maker, reading on his own time and then interpreting material for his students, as best as he could. He mentioned in a meeting that he brought speakers from queer advocacy groups into his diversity class, an effective strategy for decentering his role as expert and allowing for voices from the field to speak expertly to students. It must have been a relief when guest speakers explained concepts and terms to his students, so he could learn along with them.

It takes time and effort to develop curricular standpoint for queer youth, or for any student who is different or experiences difference. Teachers have to learn on the fly. When a student who spoke no little English enrolled in my class from Taiwan, I had to quickly learn some Chinese. When a student with Asperger’s Syndrome enrolled in my class, I learned quickly about reading and writing strategies for students on the autism spectrum. In many cases, I learned the best sources of information about students and their abilities were the students and their parents. I learned a lot of Chinese from Alan, by asking him to teach me key words and phrases. Jay’s mom gave me a book on educating
autistic students. While every teacher hopefully possesses a toolbox of interventions, no teacher can be expected to be fully knowledgeable about the infinite range of possibilities children present. Casey offered a sympathetic view of her teachers:

I can't imagine that teachers who have a lot less time on their hands, have a lot more to do, like an actual job and stuff, have time to search the Internet looking around at these issues, like I do. (Casey, Exit Interview)

Students like Casey, and often their parents, too, can be good sources of information and insights for teachers, because they are in tune with Discourses that impact their lives.

Biologically, youth are capable of hearing different frequencies than adults. In England, an inventor created a sonic deterrent, called the Mosquito, which uses a high frequency tone to dissuade young people (usually under 20) from congregating around shops. Adult shoppers are mostly oblivious to the tone. Soon after, British youth copied the tone onto their cellphones to alert them during classes when they had a text or call (Merrill, 2013; Vitello, 2006). Connecting this concept to language and identity, educators are attuned to different Discourses than students. Miller (2015) writes that students “who are LGBT*IAGCQ or have differential bodied realities... are highly attuned to prevailing gender and sexual norms” (p. 39). Queer youth in this study asserted that they are more attuned to issues of sexuality and gender than straight youth (other than Kate), due to the discursive power of heteronormative Discourses. Even if a queer teen doesn’t know much about sexuality, they have developed attunement via “macro-aggressions” (Miller, 2015, p. 40) that frame non-normative sexualities as deviant.

Students in this study, as part of youth culture and queer communities, not only heard Discourses that their teachers could not hear, but were also dialed into different
Discourses than their teachers. In the same way we tune into a particular radio station or scan for stations that we want to hear, students in the study tuned into LOGO (a gay-themed TV network) or scanned YouTube searching for information about lesbians. Students in the study tuned into or searched for Discourses that helped inform and affirm their identities. At the same time, queer students (or a straight student like Kate with a strong interest in social justice) are highly attuned to Discourses that may saturate the airwaves but go unheard (or are ignored) by teachers, because straight adults possess little background or interest in these Discourses. I name this concept *discoursal attunement*.

Discoursal attunement means a person’s interests and knowledge influence the frequencies they can hear or that they choose to focus on. Gee’s conception of affinity spaces (2005) informs this concept, except Gee focuses on a space constructed by like-minded individuals who are interested in promoting and developing certain Discourses as a way to cultivate identity and community. Findings from this study suggest that discoursal attunement focuses on circulating Discourses that are broadcast via numerous literacy platforms. Students in this study often tuned to Discourse communities that they felt affinity for, like the YouTube video blog, *Lesbian Answers*; however, they were also attuned to harmful Discourses about sexuality and gender.

By participating in this study, teachers became attuned to Discourses that students brought into meetings. Students transmitted Discourses, such as “queers have always been here” and “we are all human,” to teachers from sites around the queer community. Students also shared their attunement to curricular Discourses, describing how teachers could best help them perform identities and mediate issues germane to their development, or their state of becoming. In sharing these Discourses, students provided information on
what to listen for in certain discursive spaces, emphasizing the affective nature of Discourses. Finally, students provided teachers with a “channel guide,” or a means to access Discourses after the student-teacher collaboration ended.

Possessing a framework, particularly one that changes over time, is important for teachers as they strive to hear frequencies they normally would not hear. Thein’s (2013) interrogation of teacher Discourses, in relation to dominant Discourses, is a good framework to help teachers attune to discoursal frequencies that impact their instruction of queer youth. Discussing criteria for selecting queer young adult literature is also a useful ongoing activity for learning about novels that are worth tuning into, especially if the criteria can evolve as novel texts become available. The selection criteria become even more useful if teachers include students in discussions about the merits of queer young adult literature. Finally, Miller’s (2015) Queer Literacy Framework provides teachers with a map to guide their interactions with students (queer or straight), by offering language to foster “favorable social contexts” (p. 40). A starting point for teachers who find themselves challenged by “proliferating identities” (Britzman, 1995) in their classrooms is to “never presume that students are a particular sexual orientation or gender” (Miller, 2015, p. 42). The Queer Literacy Framework is an important tool in transforming dispositions among educators, so that they can more adeptly attune to Discourses that oppress or affirm queer students. Attunement, however, should continue in contexts where students and teachers are in dialogue about queer issues and identities, so that students are able to try on the identity of “knowledge expert” as their teachers enhance their ability to hear Discourses that impact their students. Further investigation by researchers might focus on other frameworks that involve students more directly in
curricular dialogue with teachers as well as elevate Discourses that influence their dispositions and identities.

**Final Thoughts**

In 1984, I was 18-years old, a time for me of growing awareness of my sexuality as a gay man. The pervasive Discourses attending to my identity were negative and limiting; in fact, my access to queer Discourses amounted to hearing demeaning jokes and witnessing cruel characterizations on TV and at school. I didn’t like Anita Bryant, because I knew she would not like me. In my own home, a rare resource about my sexuality was *The Ann Landers Encyclopedia A-Z* (Landers, 1978), which offered pro and con arguments about homosexuality. My awareness of the AIDS epidemic mirrored much of the rest of the nation: I was ignorant and fearful. I saw pictures of the dying, and only felt aversion and confusion. At that time, I wasn’t attuned to a single affirming Discourse regarding gays and lesbians.

It’s now 2015, and I have just conducted a study about how curriculum can be more inclusive of queer students. I know I wouldn’t have been able to conduct the study were it not for the political activism of the queer community during the AIDS crisis, groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation. I recently watched *We Were Here* (Weissman, 2011), because students in my study recommended the film. As I watched, I learned about a period of history that I lived through. I was a living witness to the AIDS crisis in this country, yet at that time I saw and heard nothing that truly mattered about the queer community. One of the primary Discourses of the film is how the AIDS crisis united members of the queer community and their allies. Words like *community, club, village, family,* and *home* were used to describe the relationships among queer people and their
allies. This conception of community is a legacy that resonates with the young people in my study when they view and discuss films like *We Were Here* (Weissman, 2011). It’s a one of the Discourses from the queer community that they have embraced, and that they have passed along to me, a situation I find to be full of irony and hope.
References


MAKING SPACE FOR UNSANCTIONED TEXTS

Greenwood.


MAKING SPACE FOR UNSANCTIONED TEXTS


Halberstam, J. (2015, April 2). Trigger trouble. Presentation for the English Department at the University of Colorado Boulder. Boulder, CO.


King Jr., Martin Luther. (1963, April 16). [Letter to Clergyman]. The estate of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.


Mehta, J. (2012). The courage to achieve our ambitions: Five pathways for the future. In


Miller, sj. (2015, April 2). Trigger trouble - introduction. Presentation for the English Department at the University of Colorado Boulder. Boulder, CO.

Constructing meaning through collaborative inquiry. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.


Appendix A: Student Consent Form

Collaborative Curriculum Design: Teachers and Students Constructing Lessons that Explore LGBTQ Issues and Identities Through Writing
Principal Investigator: Michael Wenk

PARENT PERMISSION AND STUDENT CONSENT FORM
November 7, 2013

Please read the following material that explains the research study in which you are being asked to participate. Signing this form will indicate that you have been informed about the study and that you give your permission to participate. We want you to understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits—if any—are associated with the study.

Once you provide your permission, your parent or guardian will also be asked to provide his or her assent to participate. You may not participate in the study unless BOTH you and your parent/guardian agree.

CONTACT INFORMATION
You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Michael Wenk, a PhD candidate in the University of Colorado at Boulder’s School of Education, 249 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0249. Michael Wenk can be reached at 303-293-8692.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION
This research study will examine the interactions and products of a curriculum design team consisting of about three teachers and six LGBTQ students at your high school. The team will study curriculum that guides the implementation of writing assignments and activities. Then the team will design lessons or units of study that use writing to explore LGBTQ identities and issues. Students who participate in this study will also conduct interviews, focus groups, and/or surveys, alongside the principal investigator. Your participation in this study is entirely up to you and your parent.

PROCEDURES
Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you don't want to. You may also leave the study at any time. If you leave the study before it is finished, there will be no penalty, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to talk for about 20 minutes about your experiences as an LGBTQ student, your experiences with writing assignments, and ways in which writing assignments have supported or constrained the exploration of LGBTQ identities and issues. These interviews will be audio recorded and later written down.
Here are the questions you will be asked in an interview at the beginning of the study (February 2014):

1. Describe your experiences as an LGBTQ student at this school and at other schools.
2. What opportunities have you been given to explore LGBTQ issues and identities through your schoolwork? Through writing assignments?
3. Why do you think LGBTQ issues and identities have or have not been included in the curriculum?
4. What might be useful additions to curriculum to address LGBTQ issues and identities?
5. What might be some meaningful writing activities to enhance the exploration of LGBTQ issues and identities in your classes?
6. In what ways (if any) have you been empowered as an LGBTQ student, as a result of attending this school and/or other experiences outside of school?

Here are the questions you will be asked in an interview at the end of the study (June 2014):

1. Describe your participation in the curriculum design project.
2. What did you learn about curriculum and the role of LGBTQ issues and identities as it relates to writing assignments and activities?
3. How do you think the participation of LGBTQ students impacts the construction and implementation of curriculum that explores LGBTQ issues and identities? How might lessons and units have looked differently without the participation of LGBTQ students?
4. What did you learn about research studies, in terms of the methods researchers employ or the findings they generate?

In addition to the interviews, you have been selected to attend 8 meetings throughout the 2013-2014 school year, during which you will work with three teachers from your school to construct lessons or units that explore LGBTQ identities and issues through writing assignments. These meetings will be audio recorded as well. I will also collect copies of any writing you produce during these meetings, such as journal responses or other written artifacts.

The recordings of the interviews and meetings will be erased once they are written down (by Fall 2014).

**RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are some potential risks if you take part in this study. These may include embarrassment or discomfort should sensitive subjects come up in interviews or arise in your writing. For this reason, you should feel free to decline to answer any interview questions and/or to withdraw all or a portion of your data at any time.
BENEFITS
There are no direct benefits to you from taking part in this study. However, the researchers hope that this work will provide useful guidance to English/language arts teachers and to teacher educators as they consider the design and potential benefits of similar writing partnerships.

COST TO PARTICIPANT
There are no direct costs to you for participation in this study.

SOURCE OF FUNDING
At this time there is no funding for this project.

ENDING YOUR CHILD’S PARTICIPATION
You have the right to stop participating at any time, and to refuse to answer any question(s) or participate in any activity for any reason. Declining to participate will not adversely affect your grades or educational opportunities.

CONFIDENTIALITY
The researcher will make every effort to maintain the privacy of your data. All audio recordings will be kept on a password-protected computer and erased once they’ve been written down (with all real names deleted).

Other than the researcher and your parents, only regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the University of Colorado Human Research Committee may see your individual data as part of routine audits.

There are some exceptions to this promise of confidentiality:
1) If we see or are told information that makes us reasonably suspect that a child or an at-risk adult is being abused, mistreated, or neglected, we will immediately report that information to the county department of social services or a local law enforcement agency.
2) If we learn of a serious threat of imminent physical violence against a person, we will report that information to the appropriate legal authorities and make reasonable and timely efforts to notify the potential victim.
3) By federal law, this promise of confidentiality does not include information we may learn about future criminal conduct.

QUESTIONS?
If you or your child have questions about this study, you should ask the researcher before you sign this permission form. The researcher for this study is Michael Wenk, School of Education, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0249. His telephone number is 303-293-8692.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them
MAKING SPACE FOR UNSANCTIONED TEXTS

confidentially, if you wish, to the Institutional Review Board, 3100 Marine Street, Rm A15, 563 UCB, (303) 735-3702.

AUTHORIZATION
I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I know the possible risks and benefits. I know being in this study is voluntary and that my child has the right to decline to participate or to withdraw his or her assent at any time during the study. I give permission for my child to be in this study. I have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 4 pages.

Name of participant (printed) ______________________________________________

Name of parent or guardian (printed) ________________________________________

Signature of student ______________________________ Date ___________

Signature of parent or guardian ______________________________ Date ___________

(Also initial all previous pages of the permission form.)

I am consenting to my child being audio-taped during the participation of this research.

_____ Yes, my child can be taped during his/her participation in this research.

_____ No, my child cannot be taped during his/her participation in this research.
Appendix B: Teacher Consent Form

Collaborative Curriculum Design:
Teachers and Students Constructing Lessons
that Explore LGBTQ Issues and Identities Through Writing

Principal Investigator: Michael Wenk

TEACHER CONSENT FORM
November 7, 2013

Please read the following material that explains the research study in which you are being asked to participate. Signing this form will indicate that you have been informed about the study and that you give your permission to participate. We want you to understand what you are being asked to do and what risks and benefits—if any—are associated with the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION
You are being asked to take part in a research project conducted by Michael Wenk, a PhD candidate in the University of Colorado at Boulder’s School of Education, 249 UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0249. Michael Wenk can be reached at 303-293-8692.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION
This research study will examine the interactions and products of a curriculum design team consisting of about three teachers and six LGBTQ students at your high school. The team will study curriculum that guides the implementation of writing assignments and activities. Then the team will design lessons or units of study that use writing assignments to explore LGBTQ identities and issues. Your participation in this study is entirely up to you.

PROCEDURES
Taking part in this study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you don’t want to. You may also leave the study at any time. If you leave the study before it is finished, there will be no penalty, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to describe at the beginning of the study your experiences in designing curriculum, your experiences with teaching writing, and ways in which your writing assignments have or have not addressed LGBTQ identities and issues. These interviews will be audio recorded and later written down. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes.

Here are the questions you will be asked in an interview at the beginning of the study (February 2014):

[Questions follow]
1. Describe your process for developing lessons and units that guide writing instruction.
2. Do state standards for your content area allow for the exploration of LGBTQ identities and issues?
3. What opportunities do the students in your classes have to explore LGBTQ issues and identities through writing assignments?
4. Why do you think LGBTQ issues and identities have or have not been included in the curriculum at your school?
5. What might be useful additions to curriculum to address LGBTQ issues and identities?
6. What might be some meaningful writing activities to enhance the exploration of LGBTQ issues and identities in your classes?

At the end of the study, you will be asked to talk about your experiences in collaboratively designing curriculum with students. The interview will last approximately 30 minutes. Here are the questions you will be asked during the interview at the end of the study (June 2014):

1. Describe your participation in the curriculum design project.
2. What did you learn about curriculum and the role of LGBTQ issues and identities as it relates to writing assignments and activities?
3. How do you think the participation of LGBTQ students impacts the construction and implementation of curriculum that explores LGBTQ issues and identities? How might lessons and units have looked differently without the participation of LGBTQ students?
4. In what ways (if any) will participation in the study influence how you teach writing in the future?

In addition to the interviews, you have been selected to attend 8 meetings throughout the 2013-2014 school year, during which you will work with six students from your school to construct lessons or units that explore LGBTQ identities and issues through writing assignments. These meetings will also be audio recorded. Finally, I will collect copies of any writing you produce during these meetings, such as journal responses or other written artifacts.

The recordings of the interviews and meetings will be erased once they are transcribed (by May 2015).

**RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are some potential risks if you take part in this study. These may include embarrassment or discomfort should sensitive subjects come up in interviews or arise in your writing. For this reason, you should feel free to decline to answer any interview questions and/or to withdraw all or a portion of your data at any time.

**BENEFITS**

There are no direct benefits to you from taking part in this study. However, the researchers hope that this work will provide useful guidance to English/language arts
teachers and to teacher educators as they consider the potential impact of similar collaborations among teachers and students.

**COST TO PARTICIPANT**
There are no direct costs to you for participation in this study.

**SOURCE OF FUNDING**
At this time there is no funding for this project.

**ENDING YOUR PARTICIPATION**
You have the right to stop participating at any time, and to refuse to answer any question(s) or participate in any activity for any reason. Declining to participate will not adversely affect your job as a teacher.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**
The researcher will make every effort to maintain the privacy of your data. All audio recordings will be kept on a password-protected computer and erased once they’ve been written down (with all real names deleted).

Other than the researcher, only regulatory agencies such as the Office of Human Research Protections and the University of Colorado Human Research Committee may see your individual data as part of routine audits.

**There are some exceptions to this promise of confidentiality:**
1. If we see or are told information that makes us reasonably suspect that a child or an at-risk adult is being abused, mistreated, or neglected, we will immediately report that information to the county department of social services or a local law enforcement agency.
2. If we learn of a serious threat of imminent physical violence against a person, we will report that information to the appropriate legal authorities and make reasonable and timely efforts to notify the potential victim.
3. By federal law, this promise of confidentiality does not include information we may learn about future criminal conduct.

**QUESTIONS?**
If you have questions about this study, you should ask the researcher before you sign this permission form. The researcher for this study is Michael Wenk, School of Education, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0249. His telephone number is 303-293-8692.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a participant, any concerns regarding this project or any dissatisfaction with any aspect of this study, you may report them confidentially, if you wish, to the Institutional Review Board, 3100 Marine Street, Rm A15, 563 UCB, (303) 735-3702.
**AUTHORIZATION**

I have read this paper about the study or it was read to me. I know the possible risks and benefits. I know being in this study is voluntary and that I have the right to decline to participate or to withdraw my assent at any time during the study. I have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 4 pages.

Name of participant (printed) ____________________________________________

Signature of participant _______________________________________________ Date

________

(Also initial all previous pages of the permission form.)

I am consenting to being audio-taped during the participation of this research.

_____ Yes, I can be taped during my participation in this research.

_____ No, I cannot be taped during my participation in this research.
Appendix C: The Vignette Mike Shared at Student Meeting #1

Don, the librarian at my junior high school, sat across from me at the shiny, plastic table, munching a McDonald’s cheeseburger. I sat, munching a cheeseburger in silence, watching him. He reached for a french fry and flipped a page over, reading another of the 15 or so poems I had written neatly in ink on typewriter paper. I sipped my Coke, wondering if I should have turned over these documents to him. I felt the exuberance of a double agent, revealing strategic secrets that might help win the war, if they could be deciphered. I also felt my betrayal might lead to grave harm, civilian casualties. It was my first – and even to this day – my only audience for those poems.

“Wow, you’ve done a lot of writing, Mike,” he finally said, looking up. “When did you write these poems?”

“Over the past few months, I guess.”

“Hmmm… I like this one,” he said, pushing a sheet of paper over to me. “You say, ‘society destroys people like me.’ What do you mean by that: people like me?”

“Um, I don’t know. People who think differently?”

He laughed. “Well, you definitely have a different way of thinking. Like when you wore a tinfoil hat around school to shield your head from gamma rays.”

I smiled, but Don was still seeking clues. “Are you saying that you are different than everyone else?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

I took a long sip on my Coke, thinking. Seconds passed. I grabbed a french fry and twisted it between my fingers. Don was looking at me, a patient, understanding expression – just a hint of a smile. A McDonald’s employee moved past the table, mopping in a prescribed sequence of strokes.

“I don’t know,” I finally said. “I don’t feel like everybody else.”

“In what way?”

A fence sitting metaphor truly is appropriate here, because how I answered would determine which way I would fall. The effect would be cataclysmic for a 9th grade boy in 1981.

In what way? In many ways. I was a poet. I was a wrestler. I enjoyed sitting in a deer blind at dusk – 20 feet above the ground in the deep Michigan woods – listening for whitetails while watching chickadees dance on branches above me. I loved playing basketball in my friend’s driveway. Slow dancing to Lionel Richie and Styx songs with Dawn and Barb and Brenda at junior high dances. Holed up in my room, listening to Tiger games on the radio, reading Robert Louis Stevenson books, wondering what would happen if a boy I liked found out.

If I was sitting in Don’s seat, a vantage point on myself as a 14-year-old – and I have occupied that seat as a teacher many times in my career – I might have seen uncertainty and confusion in my eyes. I might have seen me sizing up the situation, following the cascading dominoes. I might have heard the flip of a switch and seen a well-lit room go completely dark. I might have heard the guile of an adolescent boy in this response:

“It’s just a phase, right Don? I mean, I’m growing up. That’s normal, right?”

“Yes, that’s normal. But…”
“So I guess there’s nothing to these poems but the hormonal rantings of a teenager.”

Don laughed. He seemed like he wanted to pose another pointy question, but then realized the light was off. My soul had gone dark. “Did you listen to that Mahler tape yet?”

“Yes,” I lied.
“What did you think?”
“It reminds me a lot of the hormonal rantings of a teenager.” He laughed again, shaking his head.
“OK, we’d better go.”
“Thanks for the cheeseburger, Don.”
“Anytime.”
Appendix D: Language Arts Writing Assignment Outline

Language Arts – AP or American Literature? (11th grade)

What kind of writing would students produce? (What is the product or performance?)
The goal is to capture VOICE and the human experience/identity, expressing your identity through that voice, whether that’s your own identity or taking on somebody else’s identity. Students have choice in topics, but would address themes from all of the texts studied during the semester. Possible genres might include: personal narrative, poetry, or a letter.

What topics or themes would be covered?
- Identity, Gender Roles, Minorities in Society, Labels and Social Construction of identity, individuality.
- A study of identity, including minority identities and more specifically LGBTQ identities but also Chicano and others (Others)
- Queer issues could include transitioning, bullying, daily life, health

What prompt (or prompt choices) would students address?
- I am a person (American), but I also happen to be ____________________.
- Write about a moment where you experienced your “identity.” Did you choose the identity? Was it imposed upon you?
- Write about how it would feel to be given a different identity.
- If you did not have your labels, who would you be?
- What would it be like to wake up in the body of someone who was a different gender, race, or sexual orientation than you?
- Using one of the books we’ve studied, how do you think the character’s life would have been different if s/he had been queer?

What are some essential questions for students to consider during the unit?
- Who am I? How does identity shape us and how do labels help shape our identity?
- How does media/pop culture shape our identity (or, perhaps, perpetuate stereotypes)? Consider stereotypes like the “butch” lesbian, the effeminate gay man, the smart Asian, the athletic black male, etc.
- How does someone else’s identity affect your own identity?

What evidence outcomes would be addressed by this writing assignment?
- the student shows increased knowledge, understanding, and empathy of minority identities
- the student demonstrates control of voice and, through that voice, an understanding of different human experiences
Making Space for Unsanctioned Texts

- the student incorporates various sources to help build understanding of and articulation of various human experiences

What texts would students read and analyze to learn about the topics?
The following are resources, such as documentaries, books, and essays, that would be paired with existing texts that deal with identities and labels, such as Black Boy, Kaffir Boy, Angela’s Ashes, LOC text, etc.:

- Every Day (David Leviathan)
- Luna (Julie Ann Peters)
- Bridegroom
- And the Band Played On (Historical text, Documentary/Mini-Series)
- “Late Victorians” (essay by Richard Rodriguez)
- How to Survive a Plague (Documentary)
- Paris is Burning (Drag Culture Documentary)
- Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (Documentary)
- Outrage (Journalism Ethics)
- Blue is the Warmest Color (censor sex scenes, but some GREAT ideas of identity)
- Will Grayson, Will Grayson (David Leviathan and John Green)
- Milk
- Philadelphia
- Dallas Buyers Club
- Brokeback Mountain (the identity others impose on you)
- YouTube: The Gay Women Channel
- LOGO Channel: One Girl, Five Gays
- YouTube video: do you think I am gay or straight (sociological experiment)
- Nancy Dean: Voice Lessons

What texts would students read and imitate to produce the assigned writing?
- “Late Victorians” (Personal Essay - Rodriguez)
- Poems by Shakespeare, Whitman, SLAM poems
- Stand up Comedy (Kate Clinton, etc.)

What activities will support students in their learning and in producing a piece of writing?
- Socratic Seminars
- Viewing films/YouTube videos, etc.
- “Privilege” game
- Writing Invitations
- Offer students choices of what to read OR to read a wide variety of texts
Appendix E: Social Studies Writing Assignment Outline
Social Studies – American History (grade 11)

What kind of writing would students produce? (What is the product or performance?)
Students would produce an informational research paper on a historical figure from the Civil Rights Movement, and then attend a tea party where they portray their historical figure as current events and issues are discussed.

What topics or themes would be covered?
Civil Rights, including rights for the LGBTQ community.

What prompt (or prompt choices) would students address?
The prompt was focused on Civil Rights figures, including leaders of the gay rights movement. The general prompt was: Evaluate the role of a leader of a social movement during the Civil Rights era, including the effectiveness of the movement in advancing rights for Americans. How did this person help this specific movement or (cause) progress in society?

What are some essential questions for students to consider during the unit?
- Was their involvement helpful or harmful?
- What were the specific ideas that belong to them?
- What was their ideology?
- How did they accomplish what they accomplished, etc. etc.?
- What did they do at the time?
- Did it change anything or did it cause more animosity than it was worth?
- Compare and contrast other movements of the time period that may have helped.
- Who were some of the biggest proponents?
- Who were some of the biggest opponents of the movement or a particular person?
- How would your historical figure address current issues, such as gay marriage or minimum wage?

What evidence outcomes would be addressed by this writing assignment?
none listed

What texts would students read and analyze to learn about the topics?
Students would have access to primary and secondary texts about key organizations, events, and leaders in the gay rights movement, such as:
- National Gay Task Force
- Lisa Ben
- Cris Williamson
● Meg Christianson
● Bruce Nugent
● Freddy Mercury
● David Carter - author
● Harvey Milk (starred)
● Gay Liberation Front (starred)
● Frank Kameny (starred)
● ONE Incorporated
● Reed Erickson Don Slater (starred)
● Harry Hay - Mattachine Society
● Daughters of Bilitis → Lesbian focused rights
● Margo Rila - Frank Esposito
● ACT UP
● Leonard Matolvich
● Adrian Ravarour - formed LGBTQ - ‘62 vanguard (starred)
● Comptons Riot (starred)
● Bayard Rustin (starred)
● Nat’l Gay Task Force - ‘73
● Robert Martin - Homophile League
● Maggie Rubenstein

What texts would students read and imitate to produce the assigned writing?
none listed

What activities will support students in their learning and in producing a piece of writing?
● Offer choices or examples that include LGBTQ topics or people
Appendix F: Writing Prompts Gathered by Mike and Student Participants for CDA

From ACT: Educators debate extending high school to five years because of increasing demands on students from employers and colleges to participate in extracurricular activities and community service in addition to having high grades. Some educators support extending high school to five years because they think students need more time to achieve all that is expected of them. Other educators do not support extending high school to five years because they think students would lose interest in school and attendance would drop in the fifth year. In your opinion, should high school be extended to five years? In your essay, take a position on this question. You may write about either one of the two points of view given, or you may present a different point of view on this question. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

From TCAPs (grade 10): You are given a choice of two schools. The first school has an excellent program in a field you're interested in and is has a great reputation. The other school has smaller class sizes and flexible scheduling. Which would you choose?

And: Your school is thinking of getting uniforms. Would you support or go against this decision? Why?

PARCC Literacy Analysis Task (grade 10): Use what you have learned from reading "Daedalus and Icarus" by Ovid and “To a Friend Whose Work Has Come to Triumph” by Anne Sexton to write an essay that provides an analysis of how Sexton transforms “Daedalus and Icarus.” As a starting point, you may want to consider what is emphasized, absent, or different in the two texts, but feel free to develop your own focus for analysis. Develop your essay by providing textual evidence from both texts. Be sure to follow the conventions of standard English.

SAT Princeton Review Practice Book
Thomas Jefferson believed that the will of the majority is "the only legitimate foundation of any government," and that protection of the public's right to free expression is of primary importance in a democracy. However, there are those who look back through the pages of history and note that when great changes have occurred in history- particularly when great principles are involved- as a rule the majority are wrong.

What is your view of the claim that the opinion of the majority is not always right? In an essay, support your position by discussing an example (or examples) from literature, the arts, science and technology, history, current events or your own experience or observation.

From 501 Writing Prompts, a professional book for teachers:
In order to save money, your principal is thinking about canceling all field trips for the remainder of the year. Write an essay persuading him or her to allow students to continue attending field trips. Use specific reasons and examples to support your response. Some people are actively involved in promoting and supporting a cause, such as the release of international political prisoners or protecting the environment. Is there a cause you actively support? Write an essay convincing readers to support that cause. Some companies offer a paternity leave that allows fathers to stay home with their newborns for several weeks while still earning partial pay and benefits. Do you think this is a good policy? Why or why not? Explain your answer.

From The Real ACT Prep Guide: In some states, legislators have debated whether teenagers should be required to maintain a "C" grade average in school before receiving a driver's license. Some people think this would be a good policy because having passing grades shows that students are responsible enough to be good drivers. Other people think that such a policy would not be appropriate because they see no relationship between grades in school and driving skills. In your opinion, should teenagers be required to maintain a "C" average in school before receiving a
driver's license? In your essay, take a position on this question. You may write about either one of the two points of view given, or you may present a different point of view on this question. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

From Pearson's *Brief Review in United States History and Government* social studies textbook:

**PART B: ESSAY**

Directions: Using information from the documents provided, and your knowledge of United States history, write a well-organized essay that includes an introduction, several paragraphs, and a conclusion.

**Historical Context:** The Preamble to the United States Constitution reads: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States."

**Task:** Using information from the documents and your knowledge of United States history and government, write an essay in which you discuss whether the America government, since 1950, has achieved the goals established for our nation in the preamble to the Constitution of the United States.

**Guidelines:** When writing your essay, be sure to

- address all aspects of the Task by accurately analyzing and interpreting at least four documents.
- incorporate information from the documents in the body of the essay.
- incorporate relevant outside information throughout the essay.
- richly support the theme with relevant facts, examples, and details.
- write a well-developed essay that consistently demonstrates a logical and clean plan of organization.
- introduce the theme by establishing a framework that is beyond a simple restatement of the Task or Historical Context and conclude the essay with a summation of the theme.