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Queering Feminist Facilitation: A Culture Circle Discusses Gender & Sexuality

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty of
Montclair State University in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

Kelly E. Lormand

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

May 2021

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Monica Taylor

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY
THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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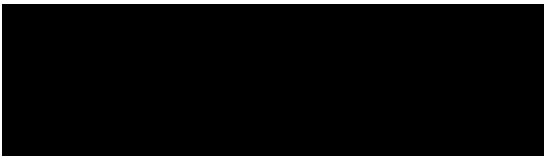
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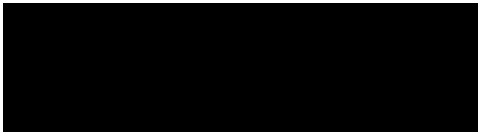
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Abstract

This study examines the collaboration of fifteen high school educators who came together to dialogue addressing patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, and heteronormativity in our practices, curriculum, classrooms, and school. Additionally, this practitioner action research study examines my attempt to queer and disrupt feminist facilitation. The study was situated in a competitive and economically privileged school district in the Northeast with district-wide goal dedicated to cultural diversity and anti-biased language. Using Paulo Freire's (1970/2004) model of culture circles and Souto-Manning's (2010) critical cycle, the group transformed a traditional professional learning community (PLC) into a feminist, queer, and activist community. The group engaged in the vulnerable process of community building through sharing personal experiences, concerns, fears, and questions addressing topics, such as sexual assault in texts, power imbalances in classroom discussions, homophobic remarks made by students, sexism printed in the school newspaper, and clashes in response to social justice events with administration. The findings of this study support the idea that teacher-led community spaces provide critical opportunities for self-reflection, examination of oppressions, and collaborative action and activism.

Keywords: queer theory, feminist pedagogy, gender, sexuality, collaboration, professional learning communities, social justice, culture circles, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, teacher activism, practitioner action research

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I must first recognize the invaluable contributions from the members of our PLC/culture circle—my friends, colleagues, and fellow “Social Justice Warriors.” Your willingness to participate, to share of yourselves, and to work for social justice in our school not only made this dissertation possible, it made real, valuable contributions to our school community. I learned from your questions, imagination, and commitment to this work.

With more gratitude than I can ever fully express, I want to thank my committee: Dr. Monica Taylor, Dr. Emily Klein, and Dr. Jeremy Price. Emily and Jeremy, you provided me with support, encouragement, and feedback that gave my heart the drive to pursue work that was non-traditional. Monica, thank you for asking, “Why am I not your advisor?” As my advisor, you have been guide, friend, sometimes therapist, and always my sounding board. I am so thankful for your guidance, support, and love along this journey.

To my family, especially my mother. We are a band of nonconformists raised on questioning, sarcasm, and open-mindedness. Thank you for teaching us early and often to live and love and fight for others. And to my chosen family whose encouragement, support, cheerleading, and unconditional love helped make this dissertation possible. I am thankful for our weekly Zoom nights that gave us community even when we were physically far apart. Thank you for lifting me up and believing in me. Love yours: “Starry nights, city lights coming down over me / Skyscrapers and stargazers in my head” (Armstrong et al., 2004). A special thank you to my leaf for proofreading, even with an adorable 18-month-old requesting you close that laptop.

This dissertation celebrates the power of community, and I count myself eternally lucky to be a member of so many supportive and loving and radical communities.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the members of the Social Justice PLC: Grace, Charlie, Joan, Mary, Tyler, Rebecca, Veronica, Antoinette, Draco, Sara, Dale, Paige, Harper, and Michelle. You are an incredible group of teacher activists, and I am so grateful for your willingness to share your stories and commit yourselves to the challenging work of bringing social justice to our school community. And thank you for letting me publish those stories in the hopes that our work will be of service to other teachers and teacher educators.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Recently, my principal relayed a comment from a Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) member to me. The parent, a mother of a male student, used the phrase “Feminazis” to describe teachers of English and history electives. “How can we expect male students to enroll in electives in these departments,” she reportedly asked, “when they are run by *feminazis*?” The administrator retold this story to me with shocked confusion. He closed the anecdote by asking, “Can you believe that?”

I could. The local context reflects the national context. The term *feminazi* has often been used to discredit and demean women of power and intellect. Popularized by conservative radio host Rush Limbaugh in the 1990s, the term has since been wielded across social media to keep outspoken women silenced, marginalized, exposed, and afraid (Williams, 2015). Limbaugh, who repeatedly expressed racist, sexist, and homophobic remarks, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by the 45th President of the United States—a symbolic gesture that nods to the patriarchal systems that continue to exert oppressive power openly and flagrantly (Gamboa, 2020). At the same time, the 116th congress is the most diverse in the history of the United States across race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation—including a record number of women (24% of the House of Representatives and 25% of the Senate identifying as female), a record number of 10 LGBTQ members, and a record number of 116 people of color serving as members of congress (Bialik, 2019; DeSilver, 2018; Reynolds, 2019). Additionally, the #MeToo movement continues to draw much needed attention to the endemic issues of sexual assault and sexual violence, igniting a national conversation and spurring several high-profile trials of powerful men. As was the case in many other progressive movements

throughout our country's history, progress is met with great resistance; resistance spurs progress.

This resistance to make real, transformational change to end patriarchy's many tendrils of oppression is apparent in schools. Schools reinforce normative gender and sexuality standards (Meyer, 2008). However, Blount (2000) argued, "schools also have been historically important sites for gender challenges and even rebellion" (p. 83). She noted that even as schools reinforced the gender norms of the day, they also, paradoxically, allowed for rebellion and nonconformity, especially for single women. Schools provide opportunities to transgress prescribed gender roles and systematically reproduce traditional binary gender roles, depending on the school culture and the perspectives held by teachers (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Meyer, 2008; Vega et al., 2012). Heteronormativity often remains unseen and unquestioned both in K–12 and in teacher education programs (Brant, 2016; Gorski et al., 2013). Supportive teachers and inclusive curriculum are two of the most important factors in LGBTQ+ students feeling safe in their school environments (GLSEN, 2018). Yet, few teachers feel prepared to address gender and sexuality based harassment and discrimination (Meyer, 2008).

Queer theory and queer pedagogy may be vital in preparing teachers to disrupt gender and sexuality harassment and to further disrupt heteronormativity in all the ways it manifests in the classroom (Miller, 2015). Brant (2016) made a case for teacher training and teacher self-efficacy in using a Queer Literacy Framework (QLF):

The need for the inclusion of trans* issues in Pre-K–12 classrooms is critical for trans* and cisgender youth alike. . . . Supporting pre-and in-service teachers, and school personnel to develop the dispositions that can travel with them across contexts and across

space and time can truly impact the future and normalization for trans* and gender creative youth to live life without fear of harassment or negative self-worth. (p. 59)

Like Brant and Miller, I am interested in researching how to support teachers as they build safer, more inclusive, and more equitable school communities for queer, gender creative, and cisgender students. Few studies exist exploring how queer theory or queer pedagogy are used, or could be used, in practice by teachers in the Pre-K–12 context. Whitlock (2010) asked, “Where are the lives living queered practice?” (p. 85). Whitlock’s question specifically points to practice rather than identity. Since most teachers are cisgender and heterosexual, the work of living queered practices should not fall only to educators who identify as LGBTQ+. The need to examine educators living (or attempting to live) queered practice intrigued me. In coming to see the critical need to queer practice for straight teachers, I saw the importance and possibility for feminist teachers to disrupt their practice as usual by employing a queer lens (Jagose, 2009; Quilty, 2017). I asked myself: *how can a queer lens be applied to feminist pedagogy? How can I queer my feminist practices?* Thus, a seed of the study presented in this dissertation was planted.

The above interaction with my principal brought up many more questions for me about gender, sexism, politics, and social justice. I questioned, as I often do, the roles teachers play in disrupting rather than reinforcing the stereotypes and oppressions interwoven through these complex topics. My usual habit is to talk with a few of my colleagues who are allies and friends. Talking through unsettling interactions like the one described above, helped me to make sense of why the moment was problematic and upsetting.

Statement of the Problem

Historical and National Context of Gender Equity in Education Policy

Since the late nineteenth century, women have made up the majority of the education force in the United States (Woyshner & Tai, 1997), as it was one of the few professions open to women for many decades. To what extent teaching is open to educators who identify as gender and/or sexual nonconforming is more difficult to ascertain statistically—little to no data yet exists documenting queer and gender nonconforming educators, though indications suggest there are more out educators than ever before (Kamenetz, 2018). Many queer educators grapple with the decision to be out as they may face discrimination, pressure to be closeted, and threats to their job security (Endo et al., 2010; Melvin, 2010; Meyer, 2008). Despite these long overdue setbacks, education has long been a field to study and build equitable practices by disrupting oppressive practices.

Educators and researchers who focus on gender equity can trace their activism to the women's liberation movement of the 1960s, whose *consciousness raising* groups came together to discuss their shared experiences as women and activists (Weiler, 1991). In the local context, women found they shared many of the same struggles and frustrations; together, they began to implement actions “to put an end to the barriers of segregation and discrimination based on sex” (Sarachild, 1975, p. 144). While the groups were local, small, and organic, the intention was also directed toward a mass movement on the national scale. The spirit and process of dialogue developed in these leaderless groups sent ripples and waves across political, academic, and professional worlds. It is no surprise that the wave included the field of education and teacher education. Women academics brought the work of the consciousness raising circles to academia where they discussed, theorized, and practiced feminism.

The women's movement saw political successes and failures, which influenced educational progress for gender equity. The proposed Equal Rights Amendment, for example, was unable to gain the 38 states needed for ratification by either the initial 1979 deadline or the 1982 extension. However, one of the major successes of the decade, Title IX legislation (1972), ensured equal rights and access to education regardless of gender. Change was slow, however, and in 1992 the Association of American University Women (AAUW) published a startling report, *How Schools Shortchange Girls*, which called for strengthening and expanding Title IX compliance and protection. The report declared, "Schools play a crucial role in challenging and changing gender role expectations that undermine the self-confidence and achievement of girls" (p. 2). The AAUW outlined necessary measures to increase research, change curricula, and prepare teachers for promoting gender equity. Since the introduction of Title IX and the AAUW report, much has changed in education to prohibit discrimination based on sex. The most pronounced advancements include the significant rise in the percentage of women earning degrees: high school graduates rose to 87% in 2009 compared to 59% in 1970; women holding bachelor's degrees rose to 28 percent in 2009 from 8 percent in 1970 (U.S. Department of Justice, 2012). In fact, this acceleration outpaced that of their male counterparts over the same period of time. Advancements were also made in funding and expanding athletic programs for girls. During President Obama's administration, notable cases expanded protections against gender-based harassment, sexual harassment, and sexual assault (*Doe v. Anoka Hennepin School District*, 2012; *J.L. v. Mohawk Central School District*, 2010; *Pratt v. Indian River Central School District*, 2010).

Under the Trump administration, multiple measures of gender and sexuality progress were undermined, reversed, or weakened. Former Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos, revoked

the previous administration's Title IX regulations. As a result, the rollbacks have made it more difficult to bring sexual assault and sexual harassment cases to trial and conviction (Lawlor, 2019). Additionally, the definitions for what constitutes sexual assault as a felony were quietly and unceremoniously revised by the Department of Justice (Oppenheim, 2019). Even more alarming are changes making it more challenging to addressing sexual harassment, gender identity harassment, and gender identity discrimination of LGBTQ+ students. According to a recent report by the Center for American Progress, the Trump administration has dismissed 91.5 percent of LGBTQ-related complaints of harassment and discrimination compared to the Obama administration, which dismissed 65.4 percent (Mirza & Bewkes, 2019). Complaints about transgender students having access to bathrooms are no longer being investigated at all and questions about sexual orientation have been removed from the National Crime Victimization Survey and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis System. These acts erase LGBTQ+ victims and youth from the data despite Title IX protections and findings from Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey (2019) that report continuing harassment, bullying, and discrimination pervasive in U.S. schools.

The anti-LGBTQ+ practices move beyond erasure. The rights of trans students, in particular, are being attacked in multiple states where legislation has been underway to keep trans athletes out of sports corresponding with their gender identity (e.g. Arkansas SB, No. 450; Michigan SB, No. 218), limit or ban medical care access for transgender youth (e.g. Arkansas HB, No. 1570; South Carolina HB, No. 4047; Texas SB, No. 1311), and restrict access to bathrooms that correspond to their gender identification (e.g. Indiana HB, No. 1525). The repercussions for such legislation are dangerous for the health, safety, and equality of trans and

intersex youth. Schools will be the sites where much of the legislation will be enacted, enforced, and/or resisted.

The Influence of State and Local Context

New Jersey, the site of this study, is one of only four states with legislation requiring LGBTQ history be included in the curriculum (New Jersey SB, No. 1569). While the laws are new and slow to be enacted, many teachers and groups who identify as allies or as LGBTQ+ have already adopted inclusive curricula and practices, examples of which I highlight in the literature review that follows (e.g. Blackburn et al., 2010; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Helmer, 2016; Kavanagh, 2016). Most of the examples depict individual teachers working to change their curriculum. The literature suggests that schools can be sites of resistance to the injustice of discriminatory and regressive policies but the state and local context heavily influences whether or not teachers feel supported in such activism (Blackburn et al., 2010; Leonardi, 2017; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003; Ullman, 2018; Vega et al., 2012). In addition to policy, teachers need administrative support and collegial support to build inclusive curriculum and anti-oppressive practices (Blackburn et al., 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, 2010; DePalma & Jennett, 2010; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003; Ullman, 2018). To counter the many challenges, Picower (2012) found that teacher activists gained much needed support joining coalitions with other teacher activists that were working toward deliberate change. Without intentional actions to change the system, heteronormativity, sexism, misogyny, misogynoir, and homophobia continue to be reproduced, even by teachers and districts with good intentions (Leonardi, 2017; Ullman, 2018; Vega et al., 2012). Therefore, the need for teachers to collaboratively discuss how to incorporate LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum and how to address

oppression related to gender and sexuality continue to be a pressing concern for educators committed to equity and justice.

Very few studies exist depicting teachers in conversation with one another about gender and sexuality (Blackburn, et al., 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, 2010; DePalma & Jennett, 2010). In this study, I attempted to address the challenges posed by Martin (2014) when he argued, “how vitally important it is to discuss gender and sexuality not only with students, but with educators as well . . . to actively promote dialogue that seeks to counter discursive gender assumptions” (p. 155). By inviting colleagues into a professional learning community (PLC) focused on gender and sexuality, we began a critical dialogue that helped us reflect on and recursively disrupt our ideas, perceptions, language, and actions as we committed to dismantling heteronormativity, sexism, homophobia, and misogyny in our classrooms and throughout our school. Aligning myself with Freire (1970/2004), I envisioned our group operating much like his culture circles as a place of dialogue, reflection, and action. Designing this study as Freirean, feminist, and queer, I attempted to disrupt how I facilitate and share power with my colleagues. As such, I explored the following research questions:

- What can be learned from a group of high school teachers engaged in a school-based culture circle addressing issues of gender and sexuality in our classrooms and school?
- How can I queer my feminist facilitation of a school-based culture circle?

I began with a statement of the problem: few K–12 educators are engaged with colleagues on the topics of gender, sexuality, or their related oppressions. Next, I explain the terms and definitions used throughout the study.

Definitions

In this study, I use language related to the field of gender and sexuality. Language is ever evolving as new and more acceptable terms are adopted, derogatory and problematic terms are replaced, and other terms are reappropriated. As such, I use terms that are currently accepted to the best of my ability. Butler-Wall et al. (2016) provided a beginning glossary in *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, & Sexuality* which my colleagues and I found helpful as a reference point. I gave copies of the glossary to my colleagues who attended our first professional learning community meeting that is the focus of this study. The terms I use most often, I define here, while other terms I define as I employ them in discussion.

First, I use the acronym, *LGBTQ+* to refer to the community that identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. The + indicates other terms that are often included such as ally, asexual, and intersex, but also denotes the openness and acceptance to the continuum of possibility in queer identification. Often, I use the term *queer* to refer to the community. In alignment with Butler-Wall et al. (2016), I use *queer* throughout this proposal in multiple ways:

As an adjective and as a noun that refers to all sexualities and gender identities that are outside and challenging of normative, binary categories. To this end, we include Q for queer with LGBT, and use the term queer as a replacement for the letters. We also invoke queer as a verb, a stance that assumes and honors human complexities, and demands action toward ending oppressive social systems that limit our gendered, sexual, and creative lives. (p. 29)

I also use the term *cisgender* to refer to individuals whose gender identity matches the sex they were assigned at birth. I use both the term *heterosexual*, and the more commonly employed slang

term *straight* to refer to individuals who identify their sexual attraction or romantic attraction to opposite sex/gender partners. *Cis/het* represents the abbreviated form of cisgender and heterosexual identifying people. This term disrupts an identity that was previously assumed normal, unquestioned, and unnamed. I rarely use the term *homosexual* to refer to individuals who identify their sexual or romantic attraction to same sex/gender partners, preferring instead *gay*, *lesbian*, or *queer*. Above all else, I defer to individuals' preferred terminology and employ the language of the authors cited to the best of my ability.

In the next chapter, I discuss my theoretical framework, queer theory, as it relates to the field of education as a whole and how straight, cisgender teachers in particular can use queer theory to challenge their own beliefs and practices. Following the theoretical framework, I offer a review of the literature in gender equity, feminist pedagogy, and queer inclusive curricula and practices. The literature review first offers an exploration of how educational research related to gender transformed over time from a focus on gender differences to gender equity to feminist pedagogy to queer inclusivity. In chapter 3, I describe the action for this study: with a group of colleagues interested in discussing gender and sexuality with a social justice perspective, we formed a dialogic group, which I refer to as a culture circle. We held ten sessions during the 2019–2020 school year with plans to continue our work outside of the boundaries of this dissertation. We used a process of naming issues central to our experience, engaging in dialogue to problematize and plan actions, take actions, and then recursively work through the process again (Freire, 1970/2004; Souto-Manning, 2010). I describe the practitioner action research framework I used to investigate the process of facilitating a cultural circle with teachers, followed by a more detailed description of the action of this study. The description is followed by the ways in which I analyzed the data I have collected and how I will ensure trustworthiness.

In chapter 4, Findings, I use a narrative method to queer the telling of our community's stories (Whitlock, 2010). The narrative is organized into four cycles that align with Souto-Manning's (2010) critical cycle to describe her own work with school-based culture circles. Following each cycle's narrative of our group's work, I follow with a queer reading of myself as a feminist facilitator (Britzman, 1998). Finally, in chapter 5, I conclude with a call for communities of activist teachers to dialogue, problem pose, problem solve, and take action together.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

To begin this chapter, I describe queer theory as my theoretical framework, which is followed by a review of the literature. To review the literature, I explored literature related to gender and sexuality from several different camps—not confined to queer theory—including studies related to gender equity, feminist pedagogy, and LGBTQ+ inclusion. The field of queer theory is still relatively new and the studies specifically related to queer theory are limited. Studies related to gender and sexuality, on the other hand, are more numerous thanks in part to the women's movement. In fact, the consciousness raising women's groups of the 1970s, the second wave of feminism, had far reaching influence that dramatically changed the landscape of educational research between the 1970s and 1990s as women academics brought practices from the consciousness raising circles to academia. In this literature review, I trace three notable stages that arose during this boom as education researchers turned their gaze toward gender and, later, to sexuality. First, I examine the concerns over gender equity, as researchers studied whether boys and girls were being fairly and equitably served in co-educational schools.

Next, I examine the university context, where second wave feminism influenced the creation of women's studies programs and feminist pedagogy. Women's studies, in these early stages, were radical disruptions to the university status quo. Building from critical studies, feminist pedagogy focused on collaboration, community building, reflection, and knowledge from experience, and social activism as key processes in challenging the patriarchal traditions of authoritarian and lecture style teaching (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997). Feminist pedagogy has influenced teacher education and educators at all levels committed to social justice and equity in schools. Practices variously termed "constructivist," "democratic," "student-centered," "critical," "progressive," or "feminist," encourage student voice, student empowerment, and power sharing

have become more commonplace. While not always attributed to critical feminist pedagogues, many of these practices were developed to challenge patriarchal classroom practices.

Furthermore, feminist classrooms questioned and examined gender, sexuality, sexism, and patriarchy in daily experiences.

More recently, the focus of research on gender and sexuality has drawn on gay and lesbian studies and queer theory more frequently to highlight the ongoing issues of LGBTQ+ students' safety in schools, the inclusion of queer and gender-nonconforming people and themes in the curriculum, and the hesitation of teachers to address gender and sexuality more explicitly. These studies attempt to disrupt assumed heteronormativity and heterosexism. Concepts of gender and sexuality are often relegated to health classes in high schools, if they are addressed at all. However, I focus on studies outside of the health classroom to examine how gender and sexuality are addressed across content areas and levels. Discussions related to gender and sexuality tend to uphold the ideas that heterosexuality is the norm while homosexuality is the deviant "other." More and more, recent studies examine the repositioning and reclaiming of queer themes, queer literature, queer students, and queer teachers as the field continues to push toward equity and justice.

Theoretical Framework

While the family of critical theory—critical, feminist, and queer theories—all inform my positionality and pedagogical approach, I focus on queer theory as the framework for my methodology and my analysis. Critical feminist pedagogy informs the design of this study and the practices I used as a facilitator and participant. I employed queer theory as a way to disrupt my analysis of teacher collaborations, feminist practices, and feminist facilitation. Queer theory emerged in the early nineties as an extension to—and a rebellion of—gay and lesbian studies,

poststructural feminist theory, and critical theory. In spirit with its critical family, queer theory critically examines the world. Queer theory is informed by Butler's (1990; 2004) theory of gender as socially constructed and performed in repetition over time. As such, queer theory acknowledges and examines, "a continuum of gender and sexual identities that the individual performs as an enactment of the self, open to interpretation and reinterpretation" (Martin & Kitchen, 2020, p. 4). Queer theory pushes theorists and practitioners to be deliberately nonconforming and transgressive (Pennell, 2016). In subversive and playful ways, queer theory breaks boundaries and binaries, including (but not limited to) male/female, man/woman, straight/gay, good/bad, succeed/fail, conform/rebel, right/wrong, normal/abnormal, etc. (Britzman, 1998; Shlasko, 2005; Waite, 2019).

Defining the Ineffable

For many theorists, an understanding of queer theory begins with a study of language and terminology (Britzman, 1998; Green, 1996; Luhmann, 1998; Morris, 1998; Shlasko, 2005). As a term, *queer* presses its own boundaries. Is it a slur (Luhmann, 1998)? Is it a noun referring to the theorist's subject position (Morris, 1998; Shlasko, 2005)? Is it an adjective describing the theory as weird (Green, 1996; Shlasko, 2005)? Is it a verb that theorists perform (Britzman, 1998; Green, 1996; Ruffolo, 2007; Shlasko, 2005)? Is it a political strategy (Filax, 2006)? Can it fulfill all or some of these usages at once or must it neatly fit one definition at a time?

Queer theorists resist firm definitions and applications of queer theory, embracing ambiguity and possibility instead (Glasby, 2019; Miller, 1998; Whitlock, 2010). There are no boxes to check, nor a strict set of guidelines to follow. There is no roadmap or manual dictating a right or wrong way to queer research, theory, and practice. But this resistance to set forms does not mean queer theory does not have a notable identity. Britzman (1998) described, "queer

theory insists on posing the production of normalization as a problem of culture and of thought” (p. 214). By problematizing and scrutinizing identifications of normal as cultural productions, queer theory deconstructs what counts as normal. Furthermore, Filax (2006) stated, “To queer is to notice, call into question, and refuse heterosexuality as the natural foundation of social institutions” (p. 140). As a verb, then, to queer is to question with a critical eye and a transgressive intention. Those who employ queer theory as a lens and engage in queer pedagogy as a practice, seek to specifically disrupt heteronormativity, homophobia, and gender binaries. In continuing to push the boundaries, queer theory can extend beyond gender and sexuality to be applied to question and examine all binary relationships and boundaries of normal (Shlasko, 2005). Applying queer theory invites a study of limits, definitions, and norms paired with an active disruption of those limits, definitions, and norms (Britzman, 1998; Tierney & Dilley, 1998).

Characterizing Queer Theory: Disruptive and Subversive

Queer theory continuously transcends definitions and boundaries. Even as theorists attempt to define it, they recognize the paradoxical struggle to do so. As with other poststructural theories, queer theory resists absolute truths (Luhmann, 1998). This continual pushing of boundaries is the most consistent feature of queer theory: a refusal to be bounded. As such, there are no set guidelines or practices. However, Britzman (1998) recognized three methods queer theory consistently explores: “the study of limits, the study of ignorance, and the study of reading practices” (p. 215). As a lens, educators can employ queer theory to disrupt their own limits, ignorance, and reading of literature, curricula, and systems of power (Meyer, 2012). In such a critical examination of ourselves, our curriculum, our classrooms and our practices, Kitchen (2014) described queer theory as offering a “*bent*, rather than *straight*, perspective on

people, texts, and contexts” (p. 128). In this description, “straight” plays on the unquestioned normalcy of heterosexuality. Having viewed the world straight on, a person might then tilt their head at an angle to challenge their perspective and begin to see from a slightly altered perspective. The bent perspective challenges seeing straight and “reading straight” (Britzman, 1998, p. 211).

More recently, Martin and Kitchen (2020) referred to queer theory as “mercurial in nature” (p. 4). This characterization, which derives from the unpredictable element mercury, also alludes to the playful and capricious Roman god, Mercury. Mercury, a thief and a trickster, connotes the rebellious and subversive nature of queer theory. Historically, LGBTQ+ teachers, themes, ideas, and literature have been positioned as deviant in relation to the understood normal of heterosexuality. Drawing from Foucault (1978/1990), heterosexuality is only understood in a binary relationship with its other, homosexuality (Luhmann, 1998). This “othering” persists in schools and curricula today. Unquestioned and undisrupted, the assumed normalcy of heterosexuality and the assumed deviance of queerness will continue to be upheld. Queer theory transgresses the binary relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality, but also seeks to transgress binaries beyond those tied to gender or sexuality. Key to such transgressions is the continuous challenging of what we know and what can be known (Luhmann, 1998).

Furthermore, Luhmann (1998) described, “queer contests authority and hopes to resist ideological appropriation” (p. 146). Like its predecessors, critical theory and feminist theory, queer theory questions authority; however, in its commitment to rebellion, queer theory takes critical and feminist theories to an even more rebellious stance. In the “rethinking of knowledge” (Britzman, 1998, p. 215) and posing “questions of thinkability” (p. 216), queer theory presses the limits, regulations, and structures of thought, truth, and intelligibility (Foucault, 1978/1990).

Thus, queer theory is characterized by its transgressive nature; it embraces a subversive position as it pushes the limits of normal, challenges notions of ignorance, and shifts how to read the world.

Cis/het Educators Engaging in Queer Theory

Educators who identify as queer face a unique set of challenges, choices, and circumstances depending on the environment in which they teach (Gonzales, 2010; Melvin, 2010). The decision of whether or not to come out to their students is one such dilemma queer educators experience while educators who identify as cisgender and heterosexual do not (Shlasko, 2005). Cisgender identity and heterosexuality carry privilege in the assumption of normalcy, acceptance, and safety. As queer theory began to formulate its identity, many theorists addressed the question of whether queer theory required a queer positionality in perceiving and experiencing the world. Britzman (1998) argued that queer theory does not depend on a particular positionality or identity. Others acknowledged that having a queer positionality was one of several ways to experience and interact with queer theory (Morris, 1998; Shlasko, 2005).

In *Queering Straight Teachers* (2007), Rodriguez and Pinar (Eds.) make the case for the necessity of queer theory to be understood and adopted by straight identifying educators. Ruffolo (2007), in particular, argued straight teachers might momentarily become “*queerly intelligible* by *giving an account of queer*” (p. 256). He explained, “Giving an account of queer is therefore a theoretical and epistemological exploration of how straight teachers can radically reconceptualize their intelligibility so as to disrupt normative discourses that reproduce binary conceptions of the self” (p. 260). Straight teachers can question and disrupt their understanding of what it means to be straight and what it means to teach within a heteronormative context. They can question and disrupt their thinking and their students’ thinking in viewing the world in

binary relationships and categories through a heteronormative lens. They can question and disrupt “the function of traditional heterosexual gender roles in reinforcing and maintaining harmful power dynamics in schools and society” (Meyer, 2007, p. 17). They can question and disrupt their curriculum and their classroom practices (Lehr, 2007; Petrovic & Rosiek, 2007). They can question and disrupt what they read and how they read it (Britzman, 1998; Morris, 1998; Shlasko, 2005).

Aligning Queer Theory with this Study

This study offered a group of teachers interested in social justice the opportunity to dialogue together about disrupting their classrooms and their practices related to gender and sexuality using our district model of professional learning communities (PLCs). Petrovic & Rosiek (2007) wrote, “teachers must be presented with opportunities to recognize and critically analyze their own positions . . . and how their positions affect the ways in which they respond to students” (p. 225). Many teachers view their responsibility in addressing heterosexism as a simple matter of “stopping name-calling” (Petrovic & Rosiek, 2007, p. 208). Petrovic and Rosiek (2007) argued that teachers must be prepared to move beyond the basic levels of disruption and the promotion of tolerance to instead “disrupt both silence and heteronormative discourse” (p. 208). They argued for teachers to engage in reflexive analysis and discourse that challenges notions about gender, sexuality, and heteronormative practices in schools. In this study, teachers who participated in our collaboration had opportunities to critically analyze their language, curriculum, positionality, and practices as they faced moments ranging from previously unquestioned status quo to blatant bigotry related to gender and sexuality. By building a nonjudgmental environment together that offered support and reassurance, the study invited

participating teachers to reflexively and critically examine attempts to disrupt homophobia, sexism, misogyny, and heteronormativity in ourselves, our classrooms, and our school.

Britzman's (1998) articulation of queer pedagogy described my approach to engaging in queering this study:

[My approach is] one that refuses normal practices and practices of normalcy, one that begins with an ethical concern for one's *own* reading practices, one that is interested in exploring what one cannot bear to know, and one interested in the imagining of a sociality unhinged from the dominant conceptual order. (p. 227)

As a theoretical framework, queer theory challenged me to disrupt my notions of normal, my assumptions of myself as an ally and a facilitator, my practices addressing homophobia and misogyny in the literature I teach, and my perception of my colleagues as allies and activists. Further, queer theory provided a lens through which I questioned and queered my understanding of what it means to collaborate and my understanding of what it means to lead. Using queer theory, I asked myself repeatedly: what does it mean to queer a teacher learning community (or culture circle)? What does it mean to queer facilitation and leadership? How can I disrupt myself and my curriculum further? Queering a professional learning community (PLC) into a culture circle encouraged disrupting the norms and traditions of the established PLCs my colleagues and I have participated in previously. The disruption to a traditional teacher collaboration began with our commitment to discuss gender and sexuality—by engaging in candid discussions, we transgressed taboos that are too often silenced and sidelined.

Gender Equality in Educational Settings and Teaching Practices

The first major phase of research related to gender focused on issues of equity. For many researchers in the 1980s and early 1990s, most studies concerned with gender focused on how

male and female students differed developmentally or were being treated differently by their teachers. For example, in the field of psychology, Gilligan and colleagues challenged traditional views of adolescent development in a series of groundbreaking studies focused on the adolescent development and relationship building of girls (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan et al., 1990). Gilligan (1982), citing a “problem of interpretation” (p. 62), challenged the traditional adolescent development models that tended to place girls at a lower level of moral development than their male peers. Gilligan developed a model focused on girls’ development by using their own voices. She found they made ethical decisions based on relationships of care. In considering the relationships and identities girls form, Gilligan et al. (1990) proposed:

For girls to develop a clear sense of self in relationship with others means—at least within the mainstream of North American culture—to take on the problem of resistance and also to take up the question of what relationship means to themselves, to others, and to the world. (p. 10)

These studies reframed the conversation to include girls and women and to reconsider the emotional and relational as strengths rather than weaknesses. Furthermore, the studies of Gilligan and her colleagues had a far-reaching impact on the fields of education and psychology, which began to transform the way researchers studied gender.

With attention turning to how girls were faring in classrooms, researchers like Sadker and Sadker (1994) scrutinized gender equity from tests to textbooks to teacher interactions. In their landmark study spanning two decades of classroom observations, Sadker and Sadker (1994) described inequities in student interactions with teachers (which favored boys), sexism prevalent in textbooks (which failed to highlight stories of women), and gender bias in standardized testing (which have a notable gender gap in performance).

Teacher Talk in Relation to Gender

In the 1980s and 1990s, educational research examined the way teachers interact with students based on gender. Several studies examined teacher talk noting that spoken interactions between teachers and male presenting students outnumbered those between teachers and female presenting students (Aguillon, et al., 2020; Kelly, 1988; Julé, 2002, 2005; Merrett & Wheldall, 1992; Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Spender, 1982; Swann & Graddol, 1988). Sadker and Sadker (1994) identified four common interactions between teachers and students: praise, remediation, criticism, and acceptance. They highlighted remediation (encouraging how to correct a wrong) to think further or to challenge a student's thinking, as the most beneficial interaction between teachers and students. From observations with a focus on gender, they noted, "the gender gap was greatest in the most precise and valuable: feedback. Boys were more likely to be praised, corrected, helped, and criticized—all reactions that foster student achievement" (p. 55). The inequity of both the amount of time spent speaking with teachers and the quality of those interactions depicted an entrenched gender inequality across schools, classrooms, subjects, and grade levels.

Their findings were not new. Spender (1982) argued that the common discrepancy in interactions between teachers with boys and teachers with girls was an expected marker of a sexist society. In taped observations of her own and others' teaching, she found that even when she and other teachers tried to spend equal amounts of time speaking with girls and boys, they consistently spent more time with male students. On average, she spent only 38% of her time interacting with girls. In explaining why attempting to spend equal time with boys and girls still resulted in notable inequality, Spender (1982) argued:

In the classrooms where teachers were trying to allocate their time equally, their efforts did not go unnoticed by the students, and despite the fact that the teachers were unsuccessful, and were able to spend only slightly more than one third of their time with the girls, many of the boys protested that slightly more than one third was unfair, and that they were missing out on their *rightful* share of teacher attention. (pp. 56–57)

In a sexist society and classroom, Spender theorized, male students protest, speak out, and disrupt lessons when the teacher's time even approaches equilibrium between the genders, whereas girls are more likely to be conditioned to remain quiet, patient, and polite. She concluded, "This is the process whereby the *male* experience becomes the *classroom* experience, whereby education duplicates the patterns of the wider society" (p. 59). According to Spender, the fact that male dominance continues to reign in classrooms should not be a surprise, as it has been the status quo of education for hundreds of years.

A few years later, Kelly's (1988) review of 81 studies confirmed that boys consistently spent more time interacting with teachers in a range of instructive, constructive, and critical ways. They were more likely to receive praise and criticism both in academics and in behavior. These findings were consistent across factors and contexts including the gender of the teacher, the content subject, socio-economic status, age level, ethnicity, region, etc. (Beaman et al., 2007). Beaman et al. (2007) followed this theme in their own literature review through the early 2000s. Additionally, Sadker and Zittleman (2009) updated Sadker and Sadker (1994) fifteen years later; their findings reiterated their previous argument that persistent gender bias, despite being in favor of boys, continued to hurt all children in their development and progress. However, the findings that boys dominated classroom interactions and that girls were being

shortchanged (AAUW, 1992) also drew some criticism and rebuttals from some researchers, which I explore in the next section.

What about the Boys?

The depiction of classrooms riddled with gender inequities and teachers unknowingly interacting more with boys than girls spurred backlash. Several studies sought to qualify or counter the claims that teachers were systemically and subconsciously teaching in ways that were biased against girls (Croll, 1985; Dart & Clarke, 1988; Hammersley, 1990; Myhill, 2002; Sunderland, 1996; Younger et al., 1999). Several of these studies considered the type, kind, and academic quality of the interactions between teachers and students. While most acknowledged that boys received more time in discourse with teachers, they emphasized that boys also received more discipline. For instance, in her study of teacher feedback, Sunderland (1996) found that boys received more disciplinary attention while girls tended to hear more academic-focused questions that prompted longer responses embedded in the subject area content. Sunderland (2000) noted, “it seems that the teacher was actually treating—or, arguably, *constructing*—the girls as the more academic students” (p. 162). The generalization that girls were perceived to be well-behaved and good students—and therefore not the victims of gender bias—was repeated elsewhere. Younger et al. (1999) identified a similar pattern where boys were commonly situated as disobedient, poorly behaved, and disruptive. In a counter to Spender (1982), Croll (1985) recognized a slim disparity in teacher interactions with boys and girls but dismissed the concern that bias against girls was the culprit; instead, he identified the primary issue was poor classroom management skills and boys’ behavioral problems. Croll (1985) and Myhill (2002) noted imbalances in the amount of attention teachers gave particular students but credited underachievement as the notable shared trait rather than gender.

While many of these studies dismissed or minimized the idea that teachers were intentionally biased against girls, they did reinforce the idea that interactions between teachers—the recognized authority in the classroom—and their students created, recreated, and reinforced stereotypical gender roles and inequities that negatively affected all students. For example, the findings that boys were more likely to be disruptive and that girls were more obedient justified the inequitable time teachers spent interacting with boys over girls. The studies defending boys seemed to uphold Spender's (1982) conclusion: "it feels fair and just to pay more attention to males, to accord more significance to their behaviour and more legitimacy to their demands" (p. 60). These studies brought up more questions that had not yet been explored in educational research: Why do teachers expect boys to rebel and girls to obey? How do gender roles and stereotypes harm students? How do teachers build or break down the gendered stereotypes they hold? Do classroom management and teacher authoritarianism reinforce gender stereotypes? Do schools reinforce gender constructs? How so? How do the intersections of race and class affect the findings? Twenty years after these initial studies focused on gender bias and gender inequity, researchers returned to questions of gender and began to look more closely at inequities regarding sexuality and gender nonconforming students (notably absent in the research).

Moving Beyond the Binary Gender Competition

More recently, Pomerantz and Raby (2017) considered the myth of a "post-feminism world." They argued that the perception of a "post-feminism" world created a problematic illusion of gender equality that hid the structural issues of sexism that persist. Further, they point out the overlapping and interlacing illusions of a similar "post-race" myth, as well as the myth of meritocracy. They explained, "These ideological positions dovetail with neoliberalism and the meritocratic contention that we are all competing equally, as individuals, on a level playing field.

The structural inequalities relating to gender, class, and “race” are consequently denied” (p. 127). In light of these denials of structural inequalities, Pomerantz and Raby concluded, “Girls are not the hands-down winners in education that they are purported to be. They struggle in ways that do not make for good headlines and, quite simply, cannot be measured by statistics” (p. 178). After thirty years of considering the gender debate, Pomerantz and Raby encouraged contextualizing the experiences of girls as intersectional and complex.

In another recent study focused on gender, Andrus et al. (2018) challenged the notion that gender equity in education must pit boys against girls to determine who has it worse. They found that boys, girls, and teachers find the same types of lessons engaging: those that involve active learning, projects, and classroom discussion (Kuriloff et al., 2017; Reichert & Hawley, 2010a, 2010b). Teaching style and classroom processes might be able to address the disparate treatment of students by gender. Beaman et al. (2007) surmised as a solution to gender inequity: “If more inclusive, more positively orientated teacher interaction styles . . . might reasonably be considered as helping to shape the re-engineered teaching context” (pp. 363–364). In the 1990s, feminist researchers and practitioners designed, implemented, and researched feminist practices meant to address the inequities of traditional classrooms. However, they primarily did so at the university level rather than in K–12 classrooms. In the section that follows, I examine the development of feminist pedagogy, which was designed to deconstruct the traditional patriarchal, sexist classroom environment.

Feminist Pedagogy

While researchers studied gender equity in the K–12 context, women’s studies classes programs were being developed by feminist academics in universities beginning with the first official program at San Diego State University (Crouch, 2012). Drawing on the work of critical

theory and pedagogy, feminist pedagogy offered alternative practices to counter what Freire (1970/2004) termed “the banking concept of education” (p. 72) that situates the teacher as the authority who holds the knowledge and divvies it out to their students. The banking method is authoritarian and patriarchal by design as it imagines knowledge as a commodity possessed by the figure of authority and parsed out depending on student obedience and adherence to the status quo. Both critical and feminist practitioners questioned and countered traditional teaching methods, choosing instead to promote more egalitarian and democratic processes of teaching and learning that aligned more closely to Dewey’s philosophy of constructivism. Despite Dewey’s (1916; 1938) well-known calls to draw on students’ personal experience and to make education experiential, K–12 teaching firmly adhered to the traditional banking method. In contrast, critical feminist teaching practices challenge the patriarchal system of education by disrupting the banking method. Namely, feminist pedagogy restructures teacher authority to share power with students by building a classroom space that values community, collaboration, personal experience, and student voice. Manicon’s (1992) definition captured the transformational and political aims of feminist pedagogy:

Feminist pedagogy is teaching with a political intent and with visions of social change and liberation—not simply with an aim to have (some) women “make it” in the world of (some) men, but to learn to act in and on the world in order to transform oppressive relations of class, race, and gender. It is teaching, not to change women to fit the world, but to change the world. (p. 366)

Changing the world is no small task. How could feminist pedagogy transform a system deeply entrenched in patriarchy, sexism, and oppression? Lorde (1984/2007) warned, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 112). She was speaking quite directly to women

who wanted to find power in the system that already existed. In contrast, Lorde argued that feminism necessitated different tools and methods that deliberately and actively fought the oppression of women, queer folx, people living in poverty, people with disabilities, and all people who disrupt the norm. Feminist pedagogy could not emulate pedagogy as usual.

Through the 1980s and 1990s, a considerable number of feminist educators, many of whom held faculty positions in women's studies programs, sought to clarify, define, create, and implement forms of feminist pedagogy and feminist processes (e.g. Bezucha, 1985; Bignell, 1996; Briskin, 1990; Brown, 1992; Ellsworth, 1992; Friedman, 1985; hooks, 1994; Kenway & Modra, 1992; Romney, Tatum, & Jones, 1992; Roy & Schen, 1987; Schniedewind; 1987). By design, few feminist pedagogues outline a definitive set of practices to follow, preferring to acknowledge a wide range of potential practices that could be feminist. One who has defined it more concretely is Schniedewind (1987), who identified five specific processes key to her vision of enacting feminist pedagogy: communication, group process skills, collaboration, praxis, and networking. These processes promote community amongst students rather than competition and isolation (Briskin, 1990).

Across the studies, similar processes emerged amongst the notable themes: sharing power and authority, drawing on personal experience, building a safe space for dialogue, and the importance of ongoing critical reflection (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997). I highlight themes from the literature on feminist pedagogy that inform my practice as a high school English teacher and my process as the facilitator of the cultural circle in this practitioner action research study: sharing power and authority, drawing on personal experience, building safe space for honest dialogue, and critical reflection.

Sharing Power and Disrupting Authority

Drawing from Foucault's (1980) views of power as intertwined with knowledge and language, feminist pedagogy seeks to question, deconstruct, and reposition authority and power between teachers and their students to create an egalitarian environment (Bohny et al., 2016; Brown, 1992; Copp & Kleinman, 2008; Ellsworth, 1992, Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; Kenway & Modra, 1992). Since educators have an institutionalized position of authority, feminist practitioners seek to creatively and critically examine how power can be shared inside an established hierarchical education system where teachers traditionally select the curriculum, facilitate the discussions, ask the questions, grade students, and highlight or censor voices, experiences, narratives, and ideas (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997). While Schniedewind (1987) suggested feminist practitioners "replace hierarchical forms of authority with shared leadership" (Cited in Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997, p. 185), other researchers have questioned how changing this relationship can be achieved (Roy & Schen, 1987). Still others question whether or not it can conceivably be achieved (Ellsworth, 1992; Kenway & Modra, 1992; Morley, 1998). Kenway and Modra (1992) considered the dilemma that grading poses in sharing authority and power, since academic institutions require grades. Grading poses a challenge but not an impossible one. Copp and Kleinman (2008) offer their grading strategies in a check, check plus, check minus system for reflection papers: "grading this way fits the noncompetitive environment we are building" (p. 110). In other courses, similar process logs might be required but not graded on a traditional scale (Bohny et al., 2016). Negotiating class processes like evaluation, rubrics, projects, and self-assessment also engages students in creating the course and feeling ownership of the grading system (Cook, 1992).

Roy and Schen (1987), high school English teachers collaborating together, critically posed the question: "How can we redefine the student-teacher relationship in terms of power and

authority as we deal with adolescent learners?” (p. 143). Encouraging all voices is an oft-cited practice (as described in the previous section) aimed at sharing the power, but the processes enacted to achieve power sharing remain a murkier area. As with the problems of dialogue and silence, paradoxes abound with the reality and implementation of shared leadership. Inside institutions and societal constructions where teachers are viewed as authority figures, altering this model is a complex task—one that may be impossible to fully deconstruct. Recognizing the complexity of power is part of the feminist pedagogical stance. Copp and Kleinmann (2008) engaged their students in conversations about the institutional power professors hold. Naming, acknowledging, and describing this power explicitly promoted the involvement of students in destabilizing the perceived and actual power educators hold over their students. Furthermore, Copp and Kleinmann advocated establishing trust, building genuine relationships with students, encouraging students to use the professors’ first names, co-facilitating classes, minimizing competition, and employing humor as important methods that create a feminist classroom environment where the educator’s role is less central and the students’ role is more collective, collaborative, and active. To share power genuinely and avoid misdirected attempts, Gore (1992) emphasized the need for “humility, skepticism and self-criticism” (p. 68).

Another approach to structuring courses in ways that invite more dialogue and safety is the practice of negotiating the curriculum (Coia & Taylor, 2009; Cook, 1992). Bohny et al. (2016) explored the effects of negotiating the curriculum as a feminist practice in a doctoral classroom. In addition to reflection through process logs throughout the semester, the group spent three class sessions negotiating the syllabus and creating their classroom norms, a considerable amount of time compared to the usually brief and rushed overview of the syllabus dictated by the professor to the students. They reflected, “we as a community had to

conscientiously embrace the concept of democratic practice. By doing so we strove to disrupt the traditional power dynamics between professor and students” (p. 288). Negotiating the curriculum establishes all learners in the classroom as knowers with a stake in their own education. Further, it challenges and disrupts the traditional positioning of the teacher with her students as the sole possessor of knowledge and authority.

Drawing on Personal Experience

Common amongst the literature about feminist pedagogy is the practice of drawing on and valuing the personal experience of both the students and the teachers (Berry & Black, 1987; Brown, 1992; hooks, 1994; Lewis, 1990; Romney et al., 1992; Weedon, 1987/1997). Valuing personal experience in academic settings, Forrest and Rosenberg (1997) argued, challenges traditional models of teaching and patriarchal ideas of objectivity as more rational and important than subjectivity, by recognizing different forms of knowledge and the importance of experience as a form of knowledge. In teaching classes focused on oppression, Romney et al. (1992) used feminist practices that asked students and teachers alike to draw on their personal experiences. They described modeling vulnerability for their students by sharing from their personal stories; then, reflection, journaling, and small group sharing encourage students to open up to one another. In the process, students build empathy and broaden their knowledge concerning race, racism, and oppression. This process of critical reflection is not without its challenges: White students confront their complicity, guilt, and ignorance, while students of color may relive traumatic situations that are difficult to process and share. Romney et al. argued that the challenges that come with delving into the personal are worth the risks and challenges but advised awareness, acknowledgment, and consideration for the burden students of color bare.

In line with Romney et al. (1992), hooks (1994) discussed the necessity and the risk of teachers being vulnerable by sharing and drawing upon their own experiences. Recognizing the risk, hooks emphasized how the practice of educators sharing their vulnerable feelings and experiences with students disrupts the ideas of teacher authority and academic objectivity. She argued:

When professors bring narratives of their own experiences into classroom discussions it eliminates the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk, linking confessional narratives to academic discussions so as to show how experience can illuminate and enhance our understanding of academic material. (p. 21)

Feminist practitioners value personal experience; they share themselves and build spaces for students to share in writing and in speaking. Experience is a central piece of dismantling the impersonal in favor of the personal and communal. The traditional, patriarchal classroom values the appearance of objectivity, fact, and logic, whereas the feminist classroom disrupts the binary opposition between objective and subjective (Romney et al., 1992). Modeling the personal, and asking students to draw on the personal, promotes the worth of all speakers as an integral part of the classroom community.

Building Safe Spaces for Dialogue

Feminist process and pedagogy center around creating safe spaces for all women, people of color, and marginalized people to find their voices through speaking, listening, questioning, critiquing, and deconstructing their experiences, communities, and larger society. Through voicing their experiences, consciousness raising study groups centralized a new type of knowledge (e.g., Hanisch, 1969; Sarachild, 1973). Sarachild (1973) explained, “One of the

exhilarating and consciousness-raising discoveries of the Women's Liberation Movement has been how much insight and understanding can come from simple honesty and the pooling of experience" (p. 248). Consciousness raising is a radical and revolutionary act that involves investigation and discovery, science and theory, generalizations from experience, and the personal as political (Hanisch, 1969; Sarachild, 1973). Beyond this process, however, she dismissed a set of methods or rules that give a false sense of authority and rigidity to the process.

In the study groups, made of just women, taking turns and hearing from as many people as possible generates more knowledge and better understanding of shared experiences. But how does this translate to a co-educational classroom where hierarchies exist and boys tend to dominate the classroom floor? Considering the findings of the imbalance of student voices in mixed-gender classrooms reviewed in the previous section, feminist pedagogy needed to disturb the traditional teacher-student interactions to invite and engage more voices (Briskin, 1990; Files-Thompson, 2018; hooks, 1994; Hunzer, 2005; Remlinger, 2005; Roffman, 1994; Rosser, 1990; Schniedewind, 1987; Woodbridge, 1994). Schniedewind (1987) promoted the benefits of small group collaborative projects, arguing that group projects encourage students to build skills of communicating, mediating tensions, sharing leadership and responsibilities, and compromising. Of course, even small, collaborative and progressive spaces can be rife with sexism and silences, as Lewis and Simon (1986) and Kuzmic (2014) pointed out. Another initial change that made its way into many classrooms is reconfiguring the desks from rows to circles, semi-circles, or small groups that promote a seminar-style centered around dialogue between the professor and students and the students with one another (Copp & Kleinman, 2008; Hunzer, 2005). Though, several feminist pedagogues point out that merely moving desks into a circle

does not guarantee intimacy, power sharing, or safety (Brookfield, 2001; English, 2008; Foertsch, 2000; Morley, 2006).

Establishing a Trusting Environment. Forrest and Rosenberg (1997) advised, "Once a democratic community structure is established in the feminist classroom, the opportunity for creative communal dialogue arises" (p. 185). Bohny et al. (2016), Copp and Kleinman (2008), hooks (1994), Hunzer (2005), Seymour (2007), and many other feminist pedagogues, view the introduction to classroom processes at the beginning of a course as paramount to creating a safe place for open and honest dialogue. Considering how key the opening days are in building a trusting environment, Seymour, in particular, wondered why more literature on feminist pedagogy does not address these processes in more deliberate detail. Seymour identified herself as a feminist practitioner both in her syllabus and on the first day of class as she introduced herself. She argued for candid explanations about instructional choices, in the hopes that "such disclosure can . . . have the effect of demonstrating and modeling the meaning of feminist theory" (Seymour, 2007, p. 196). The disclosure of feminist perspectives and practices may help counter the fears, confusions, and misperceptions about feminist pedagogy and theory, especially when followed up with practices that promote honest discourse. Moving desks and assigning group projects do not guarantee talk will be shared, honest, or balanced: building a community of respect is a crucial component. The creation of these safe spaces is not simple, nor is it guaranteed merely by inviting students to speak.

Addressing tensions, silences, and oppression within the classroom. Professors must also be aware of the injustices and power hierarchies of society that can be unintentionally reproduced inside the classroom. Freire (1970/2004) emphasized, "Because dialogue is an encounter among women and men who name the world, it must not be a situation where some

name on behalf of others" (p. 89). In the study of her own curriculum and instruction course that focused on anti-racist pedagogies, Ellsworth and her students found that building a safe and democratic space did not happen despite the intention of all participating. Ellsworth (1992) warned, "Dialogue in its conventional sense is impossible in the culture at large, because at this historical moment, power relations between raced, classed, and gendered students and teachers are unjust" (p. 108). As such, many of her students felt silenced, afraid, tense, and vulnerable. Similarly, Lewis and Simon (1986) unmasked the ways patriarchal structures were recreated in their graduate classroom even with a professor keen on "break[ing] the discursive monopoly" (p. 461). Rather than a safe discussion, the women of the class also felt silenced, embarrassed, and uncomfortable. Dialogue alone cannot build a classroom space that is immune to the power dynamics of an unjust society.

Notably, in both the studies of Lewis and Simon (1986) and Ellsworth (1992), the safe dialogue that proved difficult to establish in the classroom did manifest *outside* of the classroom in smaller groups of students finding one another to debrief, reflect, and process the tension of the classroom environment. Ellsworth termed the smaller subsets "affinity groups" (p. 109) as they grouped organically by shared identity or common experiences. She explained a significant change in perspective she and her class experienced in response to the affinity groups:

We began to see our task not as one of building democratic dialogue between free and equal individuals, but of building a coalition among the multiple, shifting, intersecting, and sometimes contradictory groups carrying unequal weights of legitimacy within the culture and the classroom. (p. 109)

The groups, which took several forms (e.g. people of color, women of color, feminists, gays, lesbians, white women, anti-patriarchal men) allowed groups to process their experiences and

thinking together before engaging the larger group. Students are not members of only one identity group; the complexity of their experiences influences how they value, perceive, and respond to systems of oppression—in this course, racism. The recognition of the affinity groups as a part of building the safe and democratic space validated the students' feelings of tension and uncertainty. Upon this critical reflection, Ellsworth and her students recognized the value in offering students time to meet in smaller, self-selected groups, as well as times for those groups to speak without interruption to the larger group. This speaks to the need for intersectionality that takes into consideration many varied experiences.

These tensions do not only arise in heterogeneous groups. In her own experience meeting in an all Black, female, feminist circle, hooks (1994) found a similar silencing of voices if the individual's views did not reflect the majority's opinion. She linked the silencing in these small groups as parallel and connected to the “silencing that takes place in institutions wherein black women and women of color are told that we cannot be fully heard or listened to because our work is not theoretical enough” (p. 68). Despite the tensions, the silence, and the imbalances, hooks remained hopeful about the ability of committed practitioners to build support systems that reach beyond the usual lines of connection. In fact, the tensions are a necessary part of the democratic processes rather than something to be avoided. hooks (2010) reinforced this idea:

Instead of focusing on the commonly held assumption that we are safe when everyone agrees, when everyone has an equal time to speak, if we rather think of safety as knowing how to cope in situations of risk, then we open up the possibility that we can be safe even in situations where there is disagreement and even conflict. (p. 87)

This perspective necessarily reshapes feminist pedagogues' goals in building a dialogic community. Rather than attempt to avoid the tensions like those that arose in Ellsworth's (1992)

and Lewis and Simon's (1986) courses, the tensions must be addressed. The processes of critically examining and acting to change the oppression lead to more open dialogue and new critical understandings. It is through testing and re-examining the environment that trust continues to build. According to Freire (1970/2004), love must also be at the center: "Dialogue cannot exist . . . in the absence of a profound love for the world and for people" (p. 89).

Critically Reflecting through Ongoing Self-Examination

Across the literature of feminist pedagogy there is a recognition and insistence that the advocated processes are neither prescriptive nor easy. Repeatedly and consistently, feminist pedagogues acknowledge and warn that feminist practices may be implemented in ways that do not achieve their desired outcomes, or worse, they may continue the forms of oppression that they sought to disrupt (Ellsworth, 1992; Luke, 1992; Manicom, 1992; Morley, 1998). Notably, throughout the research, there is a consistent questioning and criticality of the self, of feminist pedagogy as a practice, of critical pedagogy (of Freire in particular), and of the lack of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984). This critical reflection is a key component to critical and feminist pedagogy: a willingness to expose and continually question, even in ourselves, what is not right *yet*. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/2004) urged, "Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly" (p. 60). The willingness to critically self-reflect and to challenge both the internal and external realities and oppressions is a consistent marker of feminist research and pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1992; hooks, 1994; Lorde, 1984; Luke & Gore, 1992; Morley, 1998; Seymour, 2007).

Critical Reflection as Pedagogy. Shrewsbury (1993) identified feminist pedagogy as a reflective process involving "a mutual exploration of explications of diverse experiences" (p. 9)

that delves into the questions, paradoxes, incongruities, and complexities of everyday life. A reflective process can be a transformative and ongoing process and an important tool in the feminist classroom (Bohny et al., 2016; Coia & Taylor, 2006, 2013; Copp & Kleinman, 2008; McCusker, 2017; Romney et al., 1992; Taylor & Coia, 2009). The act of writing reflective and autobiographical responses to class reading and discussion draws on the experience and knowledge of the students, while encouraging new connections, ideas, and insights. Coia and Taylor (2013) describe the power of sharing reflective writing:

Insight comes in telling our stories to one another. We do not tell the stories because we have insight: they are not complete in that way, with their lesson neatly attached. Rather it is in the telling and the retelling to each other that meaning is made and insight is gained. (p. 10)

According to Coia and Taylor (2009), over time they found that writing autobiographies alone and having students write autobiographies alone was not enough to challenge their thinking and create new insights. But the process of writing our stories and sharing them with others in reflexive and recursive cycles uncovers the process of becoming: “No text remains the same, including the narratives of our lives” (Coia & Taylor, 2013, p. 14). Coia and Taylor (2013) emphasized “the importance of focused rigorous reflection from various viewpoints on issues we think we already know” (p. 14).

Critical of Feminist Pedagogy. In interviews with 40 professors and students engaged in feminist empowerment pedagogy and/or women’s studies courses, Morley (1998) reflected on the common critiques of empowerment pedagogy on several fronts: the reliance on group work, the arrangement of desks in circles rather than rows, the tendency of “being too evangelical, naïve, and certain” (p. 20). The result, she warned, is an emotional burden on feminist educators

and students in women's studies classes. Morley further argued, "feminist educators often provide quasi-therapeutic services without resources to replenish them, and without any checks and balances" (p. 24). Especially in the setting of large, patriarchal institutions of higher education, the effect can be confusion and exhaustion as they receive little support. Morley did not offer any solutions but a reminder that empowerment pedagogy is often not that empowering. Such reminders keep the critical eye of feminists on their practices to reconsider, revise, re-examine what they teach and how they teach it.

Manicom (1992) also sought to problematize the assumptions of feminist pedagogy. Manicom analyzed experience, collaboration, and authority as they are generally discussed by feminist pedagogical literature. For each area, Manicom asked, "What is problematized and what is not?" For experience, Manicom noted that it is problematic for feminist pedagogues to assume that sharing of personal experience is always validating and results in the building of solidarity.

Critical of Critical Pedagogy. In *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* (1992), Luke and Gore (Eds.) anthologized nine important essays that critically analyze feminist and critical practices. They rejected certainty in favor of the view that "knowledge is always provisional, open-ended and relational" (p. 7). The authors argued, more than a set of practices, poststructural feminism is an ongoing debate seeking to challenge not only the traditional and patriarchal thinking but liberal assumptions as well. Especially the ideas concerning power and authority require constant examination. Gore (1992) explained, "I believe academics must continue the kinds of political struggles which are the concern of critical and feminist pedagogies but should do so while constantly questioning the 'truth' of their/our own thought and selves" (p. 69). Is power given? Are students merely receptacles to fill with knowledge and power? What if students do not want to be empowered? Can educators ever really relinquish institutional power?

Does power sharing render power invisible? hooks (1994) described feminist pedagogy as the most self-critical, a sign of its poststructural roots in exploring the muddiness and resisting universal truths.

Critical of Feminism's Lack of Intersectionality. An important and ongoing critique of first and second wave feminism has been the tendency to universalize the experience of women, and to do so with the experience of white women as the standard of reference. Crenshaw (1989, 1994) first coined the term *intersectionality* to point to the intersecting experiences of racism, sexism, classism and other forms of oppression that influence the way individuals experience the world. Lorde (1984), hooks (1989, 1994), and Collins (1989, 1991) were a few of many voices of Black feminists who critically challenged their white, feminist academic peers not to ignore these intersections in the discussion of feminism and the fight against patriarchal systems of power. In fighting the patriarchal system of power, they argued, it was crucial to critique and consider all forms of domination and oppression: one form of oppression is not more important than others (Lorde, 1984). hooks (1989) argued, "By calling attention to interlocking systems of domination—sex, race, and class—Black women and many other groups of women acknowledge the diversity and complexity of female experience, of our relationship to power and domination" (p. 21). When mostly white feminists continued to be ignorant of the complex experiences of Black women, hooks (1994) noted the ways in which the feminist movement isolated Black female activists, scholars and writers, who were "often the targets of misguided white women who were threatened by all attempts to deconstruct the category 'woman' or to bring a discourse on race into feminist scholarship" (p. 121). These critiques challenged feminist pedagogy to continually reexamine how they addressed multiple forms of oppression as activists and educators. hooks implored white feminist educators not to be threatened by the tension,

frustration, and conflicts that arise when “confronting one another across differences,” and instead, “to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth” (p. 113).

Rather than ignore the tensions created by opening feminism to intersectional and diverse experiences, it was—and continues to be—necessary for feminist practitioners to explore and acknowledge the tensions. For example, Ellsworth (1992) documented her experience with the tensions caused by not thoughtfully addressing intersectionality in her course on racism. During the course, she and her students did not feel empowered or safe, but rather than shutting down conflicts, they found new ways to address them through affinity groups (described above). Weir (1991) and Romney et al. (1992) also addressed anti-racist pedagogy and how to discuss multiple oppressions in the classroom. Importantly, they acknowledge that the solutions are not simple. Romney et al. (1992) warned of the emotional triggers that shifts in perspective can take when discussing intersecting oppressions. White and privileged students may feel defensive, resentful, shocked, guilty, self-conscious; whereas students of color may feel frustration, anger, resentment, and impatience. Romney et al. emphasized the use of feminist pedagogy to respond to such emotionally charged scenes in the classroom: draw from personal experience, reflect on what they are hearing and experiencing, build on empathy, community, and collaboration, etc. Most importantly, they argued “action is the natural antidote to both denial and despair” (p. 7). With this in mind, a central component of intersectional feminist classrooms is the opportunity for students to act as change agents in a transformative space. Kishimoto and Mwangi (2009) describe the transformative classroom as one: “really in turmoil, because by putting women of color in the center, our identities, assumptions, and our normalcy of comfort zones for both faculty and students are constantly being challenged and disrupted” (p. 99).

Critical Friends and Partners. Critical conversations between colleagues who form dialectical relationships can be a model of living the practice of feminist pedagogy. Notably, several pairs of academics have teamed up in partnerships that challenge their thinking, knowing, and practicing over weeks, months, or years of their professional lives: hooks writes about her ongoing relationship with Scapp (1994; 2010); Taylor and Coia have published numerous articles and chapters over two decades of collaboration (e.g. 2007, 2009, 2013); Freire and Macedo (1987). In similar ways, professors have partnered with graduate students in reflexive exercises to disrupt the power relationship and re-examine the dynamics of patriarchal classrooms: Lewis as a graduate student with her professor, Simon (1986); Kuzmic (2014) with his graduate student, Madison, both reframed their thinking about classroom instances that felt oppressive to the students. In reflecting on their own and together, they came to see their own complicity in oppressive systems. Critical work calls for a commitment to critically re-examine what teachers and teacher educators know and believe in on-going, iterative processes.

In the third section of this literature review, I analyze the literature related to using queer theory, queer inclusive practices, and queer inclusive curriculum in the classroom. The relationship between feminist theory and queer theory has been dissected by several theorists (Jacobi & Becker, 2013; Jagose, 2009; Marinucci, 2010; Murray & Kalayji, 2018; Quilty, 2017) who have considered the ways the two overlap, intersect, and diverge. Jagose (2009) believed, “However different their projects . . . feminist theory and queer theory together have a stake in both desiring and articulating the complexities of the traffic between gender and sexuality” (p. 172). This shared stake, she posited, brings the two in relationship together as they move forward to challenge binary conceptions and systemic and institutionalized power structures. Similarly, Quilty (2017) argued for an intersectional pedagogy that joins queer and feminist together rather

than elevating one over the other. This intersectionality is central to this proposed study in challenging multiple forms of oppression. I consider the convergence of feminist and queer perspectives as necessary and complementary partners that both challenge and benefit one another. The following section focuses on how teachers implement gender and sexuality into the curriculum, often using feminist pedagogy (whether acknowledged or not) to do so.

Queering Curriculum and Practice in K–12 Classrooms

While the transformation of pedagogy in Women’s Studies classrooms at the university level dramatically shifted the discussion of gender, patriarchy, sexism, and the experiences of women, little changed in the K–12 setting to do the same. The pedagogical practices of the feminist educators have been adopted by many under the heading of *student-centered learning* and constructivist practices, which reframes them less as critical and more as developmental. While the evidence of student-centered learning is relatively easy for me to see from my own experience as a high school educator, I wondered how prevalent topics related to gender and sexuality were: are K–12 educators addressing gender and sexuality in their curricula? If so, how? In this section, I explore the field of K–12 education (with a focus on my own content area: secondary level English classrooms) to explore how teachers approach, discuss, and implement gender and sexuality in their practices and curricula.

In searches related to gender and sexuality in K–12 education, the focus in the past two decades has been on the LGBTQ+ community. Following Butler’s (1990, 2004) theories describing gender as performative, fluid, and social, more and more researchers began to focus less on boys and girls and more on the spectrum of gender and sexuality. Queer theory and pedagogy pushed the field to disrupt heteronormativity, homophobia, and binary systems that oppress lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and gender nonconforming

students and teachers (Britzman, 1998; Shlasko, 2005). The field is still under-researched but has gained more popularity and visibility recently. In several searches, I focused on how teachers addressed gender and/or sexuality in their curricula and how teachers were being prepared to make their curricula more inclusive of all LGBTQ+ stories and experiences. For this reason, I excluded literature that focuses on LGBTQ+ students' actions to make schools safer—many of which highlight the importance of Gender and Sexuality Alliances (Griffin & Ouellett, 2003; Toomey et al., 2011).

In studies focused on teachers' feelings toward discussing gender and sexuality and/or attitudes about implementing inclusive curriculum, the most commonly repeated themes focused on teachers' fears (both real and perceived) and their methods of avoidance when the topics arise (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; Endo et al., 2010; Malins, 2016; Meyer, 2008; Puchner & Klein, 2011, 2012; Schieble, 2012; Taylor et al., 2016; Steck & Perry, 2017; Ullman, 2018). Grade level makes a difference; at the high school level, there are several examples of individual teachers implementing gender and sexuality themes and texts in their curricula (Allan, 1999; Bender-Slack, 2010; Files-Thompson, 2018; Helmer, 2016; Kavanagh, 2016; Kenney, 2010; Macaluso, 2015). Other articles focused on encouraging fellow educators how to make their curriculum more inclusive by giving examples of their own projects (Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Blackburn & Clark, 2011; Blackburn & Pennell, 2018; Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Pennell, 2016). Additionally, a small number of studies focused on professional development opportunities for in-service teachers to gain knowledge, experience, collaboration, and support in implementing LGBTQ inclusive changes into their curricula (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, 2010; DePalma & Jennett, 2010; Guerrero et al., 2017; Taylor, 2013; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003).

Teachers' Fears and Avoidance about Discussing Sexuality

Several studies acknowledged the fear many teachers feel about implementing themes, discussions, or texts related to gender and sexuality in their classrooms (DePalma & Atkinson, 2010; DePalma & Jennett, 2010; Endo et al., 2010; Malins, 2016; Meyer, 2008; Puchner & Klein, 2011, 2012; Schieble, 2012; Taylor et al., 2016; Steck & Perry, 2017; Ullman, 2018). Teachers' fears manifested as four intersecting threads: a) fear of parent disapproval; b) fear of administrator disapproval; c) fear of losing their jobs; and d) fear of scenes or themes that are not "age appropriate." In interviews with middle school English Language Arts (ELA) teachers in the Midwest, Puchner and Klein (2012) noted, "The most prominent source of anxiety reported by teachers was potentially negative reactions from parents, which sometimes extended to a fear of being reprimanded or fired by the school administration because of the parental reaction" (p. 9). These fears existed even when teachers had no prior negative interactions with parents or administrators. Fear influenced choices: teachers avoided or dismissed conversations about sexuality by skipping scenes in a text that addressed sexuality, advising students to direct questions to their parents, and even discouraging students from writing about or researching topics related to sexuality when given a choice assignment. The authors concluded that lack of training in adolescent sexuality and lack of clear guidelines for teachers in terms of addressing sexuality increased the avoidance and fear.

Administration Sets the Tone. Across the literature, the tone set by the administration and community can greatly affect teachers' confidence and commitment to gender and queer inclusive curriculums. The role of administration in setting expectations for faculty made a notable difference when several cohorts of schools in New York City attempted to incorporate queer inclusive curriculum. In fact, Ullman (2018) found that schools in New York City

that viewed inclusive curriculum as an anti-bullying campaign were more likely to feel “uncertainty and insecurity” (p. 503), whereas schools with a clear commitment to gender inclusive curriculum as celebratory were more likely to approach lessons with a “celebratory, affirming position” (p. 504). Puchner and Klein (2012) noted, “knowing you can get fired, and being physically very close to those who can fire you yet not knowing exactly what will get you fired, is a form of oppression” (p. 13). They called for clarity from school administrators and boards in making more explicit the norms and expectations teachers should follow in terms of addressing issues of sexuality in the classroom rather than leaving it up to individual teachers to guess what is appropriate. Further, they argued for conversations between superintendents, principals, and teachers, as well as amongst teachers more informally. Silence about sexuality increases fears and anxieties, whereas open communication encourages clear expectations and practices.

Intersection of Race and Sexuality. Race/ism influences an educator’s decision to be out as LGBTQ+. Melvin (2010), an elementary school teacher in Ohio, discussed her struggle with her identity as a queer woman of color entering the field of education. She explained, “I believed that I had to live in silence about whom I dated if I was going to have a career in teaching” (p. 131). She conducted an inquiry into the lives of three educators at three different grade levels: elementary, middle, and high school. All three chose not to disclose their sexual orientation, in part because of their racial identity and the school population with which they worked. Melvin noted internalized homophobia as well as perceptions of Black communities as less accepting of non-traditional sexual identities. For instance, Melvin described one participant who “believed that disclosing her sexuality would breach the trust she had established with her students and staff” (p. 136). Melvin argued that some queer educators of color are “reluctant to

interrogate sexuality” (p. 137), in part because they are already required to interrogate their racial identity. Sexual identity can be hidden, and therefore remain un-interrogated.

Alexander (2005), Lewis (2011, 2015), and Love (2017) also recognized the layered experience of teachers who are Black and queer but emphasized the potential benefits. In these studies, sexuality and race were both central to pedagogy. Alexander (2005) explained, “our bodies are always already racially historicized, sexualized, physicalized, and demonized. . . . Talking and presenting ourselves in the classroom as gay merely further illuminates the complexity of our character and possibility of our beings” (p. 250). He viewed his identity as a gay man as a critical, ongoing teachable moment for himself and his students. Love (2017) argued for the importance of studying Black lesbian educators and the possibility for Black lesbian educators to effectively mentor Black male students by drawing on their female masculinity. In a case study focused on a mentor, Nikki, Love (2017) found, “In the absence of Black males, Nikki’s female masculinity is wanted, celebrated, and affirmed as she troubles gender norms and mentors Black boys from a queer space” (p. 450). This study challenges the assumption that masculinity can only be performed by cisgender men, and further challenged the assumption that an educator’s gender performance or sexuality will alienate cis/het boys.

Fears among LGBTQ+ Educators. The threat of negative repercussions silences discussions in the classroom, but fears for teachers who identify as LGBTQ+ often silence their identity, not just the curriculum (Bower-Phipps, 2017; Endo et al., 2010; Melvin, 2010). Endo et al. (2010) analyzed the fears of six teachers who identify as queer, none of whom were actively out in their classrooms (though all were out to a select few colleagues). For queer teachers, the stakes are much higher than for educators who identify as heterosexual. The authors explained, “gay and lesbian teachers in the Midwest are often required to conform to the current ‘good

teacher' image constructed by U.S. school ideology, an image which perpetuates heteronormative expectations resulting in the don't ask, don't tell policy in the school setting" (p. 1026). This often unspoken, but sometimes explicit, expectation forces LGBTQ+ teachers to choose between hiding a portion of their identity or risking the security of their position and their professional careers depending on the inclusivity or adversity of their school and community climate.

In both Endo et al. (2010) and Melvin (2010), the educators who identified as queer but chose not to be out were still committed to providing a safe community for their students.

Beyond that, many were committed to social justice. Endo et al, (2010) described,

Despite the desire to conceal their sexual identity, our queer teachers revealed that they see it as their duty to promote equity and social justice in the school setting, as well as their desire to provide a safe space for all students. (p. 1029)

The desire may seem paradoxical, as some argue that having out educators as role models plays a role in LGBTQ students' safety (Adams & Emery, 1994; Bower-Phipps, 2017; Shlasko, 2005). It is difficult to know whether one factor needs to be established before the other: do out queer teachers change the environment, or does the environment make it safe for queer teachers to be out? Khayatt (1997) envisioned that queer teachers can queer classroom spaces in multiple ways beyond open identification. Shlasko (2005) explained, "a performative acknowledgment of queer possibility can generate ambiguity that is more pedagogically useful than claiming a category" (p. 131). In this sense, it is gender performance that can challenge heteronormativity; any educator, regardless of gender or sexual identification, can play with gender roles and identities as multiple and fluid. Still, performing non-traditional gender roles involves risk. In some communities, the old policy of "don't ask; don't tell" dominates the expectation for educators'

gender and their sexuality performances (Endo et al., 2010). Thus, it is problematic if the onus of representation and inclusiveness falls solely on LGBTQ+ educators. Instead, preparing and supporting straight teachers in building safer, more inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ students and educators (GLSEN, 2018).

Implementing Gender & Sexuality into the Curriculum

Griffin and Ouellett (2003) noted that while much of the research on LGBTQ+ issues in schools focused on the need for schools to be safe places, there was little discussion about inclusive curricula: What did it look like? Who was teaching it? What are the themes and texts and characters? Teachers and teacher educators have addressed gender and sexuality into their curriculums for over 30 years (Allan, 1999; Blackburn & Buckley, 2005; Clark & Blackburn, 2009; Helmer, 2016; Kavanagh, 2016; Page, 2017). A large portion of studies about queer inclusive curriculum focus on English Language Arts (ELA) teachers, usually at the high school level, addressing gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ+ themes, characters, and authors in their curriculum (Allan, 1999; Bender-Slack, 2010; Files-Thompson, 2018; Helmer, 2016; Kavanagh, 2016; Kenney, 2010; Macaluso, 2015). Both Helmer (2016) and Kavanagh (2016) presented findings of 11th and 12th grade literature classes featuring LGBTQ+ themed literature. Helmer's (2016) study of one elective course highlighted several environmental factors that made it possible for a Gay and Lesbian Literature course to succeed: the teacher, who openly identified as a lesbian, also identified as a feminist and an activist committed to anti-oppressive curriculum, she was a veteran teacher with 15 years of experience, the school community had a commitment to social justice, and students self-selected to take the elective. In this environment, the course flourished. As such, the course "intervenes disruptively into the heteronormative space of a high school" while at the same time, it "normalised talking about LGBT topics" (p. 38). Not only did

the students engage with queer literature, they also employed queer theory to disrupt their reading practices and to analyze queer subtexts that otherwise go unnoticed.

Kavanagh (2016) also sought out ELA educators who held explicit commitments to support LGBTQ+ students and implement LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum. From an original pool of 30 teachers recommended for their reputations as allies, Kavanagh observed four closely. She then highlighted two in particular for this study: one a gay identifying man and one a straight identifying man who had collaborated together on a 12th grade ELA curriculum focused on LGBTQ+ identity. Kavanagh's primary finding focused on how the two teachers navigated dialogue and protected students through both public and private sharing. Both teachers often employed anonymous questions, exit slips, and silent discussion activities in addition to whole class discussion as a deliberate effort to protect students. Silent and anonymous participation afford students the opportunity to keep their own identities and attitudes hidden, which is especially important for queer students who are not out and for all students who worry that their ideas may not be accepted by their peers.

The case studies of Helmer (2016) and Kavanagh (2016) represent exemplar cases where intentional teaching yields positive results in inclusive curriculum. However, Kavanagh also acknowledged that the teachers she studied ranged in their inclusion from passing anecdotes about an author's sexual identity to the more deliberate practices of the two teachers she highlighted. These studies represent rare cases rather than the norm. In another case study at the secondary level, Macaluso (2015) presented a counter example that is likely much more common: a teacher believing himself to disrupt heteronormativity while unintentionally upholding it. Macaluso employed poststructural and feminist poststructural theory to examine a self-proclaimed critical educator's discourse in teaching a canonical text (*The Great Gatsby*).

Unlike the previous studies, this teacher was not teaching an LGBTQ+ inclusive curriculum but was attempting to disrupt notions of power along gender issues. Despite his intentions, Macaluso found the teacher's discourse enacted, reinforced, and guarded heteronormative expectations of masculinity in his interactions with his students. For instance, he joked about taking a student's "man card" for not knowing about a sports-related event. This study adds to many in the more general field of teacher education that suggest teachers' perceptions of what they do and their intentions for their practice often differ from the patterns enacted in the classroom (Leonardi, 2017; Puchner & Klein, 2011).

These individual cases of single teachers attempting to engage gender and sexuality inclusive curriculum suggest that it is possible, although difficult to integrate successfully. The literature most commonly calls for teacher preparation through targeted professional development (Blackburn, et al., 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, 2010; DePalma & Jennett, 2010; Guerrero et al., 2017; Leonardi, 2017; Malins, 2016; Pennell, 2017; Scheible, 2012; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003; Taylor, 2013). In the next section, I review examples of professional development opportunities that sought to prepare in-service teachers to implement gender and sexuality into their curricula.

Teacher Preparation for Gender & Sexuality Diversity and Professional Development

In the broader move toward culturally relevant, democratic, critical, and inclusive pedagogy, gender and sexuality diversity is only rarely included explicitly in teacher preparation programs for pre-service teachers and professional development for in-service teachers. Horn et al. (2010) surveyed, examined, and evaluated all teacher education programs in Illinois based on their inclusion of LGBTQ+ themes and identities on curriculum, course guides, organizations, programming, events, mission statements, etc. In their report, 72% of schools audited failed (41

of 57). Only one school received a B and only one school received an A grade. Horn et. al. concluded, “If we expect teachers and schools to support the health and well-being of all students and families, including LGBTQ+ ones within their communities, then teacher preparation programs must provide developing teachers with an education that includes attention to sexual orientation and gender identity issues” (p. 76). They listed recommended actions including ensuring anti-discrimination policies include sexual orientation and gender identity, conducting safe-zone training with faculty, establishing LGBTQ+ resource centers, infusing sexual orientation and gender identity topics into multiple courses, and several more.

Richard (2015) found a significant relationship between teachers who experienced professional development specifically focused on homophobia and teachers’ willingness to discuss topics related to sexual diversity. A pre-service program in Canada provided an intentional LGBTQ+ education for pre-service teachers with sociology coursework beginning in the first year that “explicitly and intentionally aims to build a safe and democratic learning space focusing on discussions about power, privilege, equity, social justice, race, class, gender, and sexuality” (Kearns et al., 2017, p. 7). The authors, who are professors in the program, used a critical incident paper that instructed pre-service teachers to observe students who “are placed on the margins of the classroom or the school” (p. 8) to engage their attention on those students who are often overlooked and excluded. Of hundreds of critical incident papers, the researchers found five that focused on gender nonconforming students or incidents of transphobia. The assignment promoted preservice teachers' reflection but also prompted them to think about actions they could have taken or would take in their own classrooms. Few pre-service programs intentionally integrating gender and sexuality into their introduction to diversity exist. For my purposes in this

study, I am also more interested in the professional development opportunities for in-service teachers, which I explore in the next section.

University and School District Partnerships: Professional Development to Support LGBTQ+ Inclusion in the Curriculum

A selection of studies explored partnerships between universities and school districts to support in-service teachers in inclusive practices and/or curriculum: in the United Kingdom, the *No Outsiders* Project (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, 2010); in Canada the *Engaging All Students* professional learning community (Guerrero et al., 2017); in New Zealand a four-year research project of collective storytelling named *Kids' Domain* (Taylor, 2013); and in New York, the professional development course *Issues of Racism and Sexism in Education* (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003). Notably, Schniedewind and Cathers (2003) explored a decade-long professional development opportunity in the New Paltz Central School District that engaged teachers in recognizing and confronting heterosexism through both teachable moments and inclusive curriculum. The authors reported marked improvement and success in teachers' willingness and confidence to disrupt homophobia and heterosexism. Of fifteen teachers interviewed, "All 15 acted on what they learned in the professional development course by addressing issues of racism and sexism and other forms of discrimination" (Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003, p. 186). Eleven of those fifteen educators directly addressed issues in their classrooms, including embedding inclusive literature and anti-bias lessons into their curriculum. Several teachers voluntarily participated in a teacher book club and study group to further explore the themes of diversity education. However, the district's commitment to diversity education was derailed when a new superintendent and school board gained power in the district. Schniedewind and Cathers (2003) alluded to the importance of administrative support and district-wide

commitment for long-term success of such initiatives. This problem is echoed by Guerrero et al. (2017), whose three-year professional learning community in Toronto called *Engaging All Students* was unceremoniously disbanded due to contractual negotiations, a teacher strike action, and restructuring within the Toronto District School Board.

In a more successful program, DePalma and Atkinson (2009, 2010) detailed their work with the *No Outsiders* program in the U.K., a large-scale, 28-month participatory action research project across 17 sites with a team of 40 members. The authors identified four key principles for such professional development to be successful: 1) it must be voluntary and teacher-centered; 2) it must be publicly supported; 3) it must be collective with collegial support; and 4) it must be informed by expertise and relevant resources. While the teachers who participated in this program did not begin feeling confident, they volunteered and expressed interest in learning how to disrupt heteronormativity and homophobia in their classrooms. The teachers were not centrally located at one school site, but they were able to collaborate with other participants via an online discussion forum where they shared their projects, questions, fears, concerns, and ideas with one another. While several participants still held fears of how parents and administrators might respond, the program challenged their thinking and engaged them in action to do something rather than nothing. The need for action above and beyond anti-bullying policies

Beyond PD: Activist Teacher Study Groups Fighting Homophobia

While several studies highlight individual teachers implementing gender inclusive curriculum (often in senior English electives), few studies exist that focus on teachers collaborating and discussing together how best to implement curriculum changes, how to employ inclusive practices, and how to support one another as they navigate difficult choices and experiences. At the university level, there are some examples of collaborative groups engaged in

critical dialogue about gender and sexuality. For example, Strom et al. (2014) used a graduate student/teacher study group as the basis for a feminist self-study. Another self-study employed a community of practice amongst pre-tenure teacher educators to help navigate the system of tenure (Gallagher et al., 2011). On a larger scale, the *No Outsiders Project*, described in the previous section, offered volunteers a project-based professional development and a community of support to implement gender and sexuality inclusive curriculum (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, 2010). While individual teachers implement projects in their own schools and classrooms, they also benefited from in-person and online discussion that provided support, encouragement, resources, and a place to reflect and critically examine their actions. Notably, many of these teachers supported one another across different districts rather than as colleagues working in the same building.

I found only one model for grassroots, radical, and ongoing collaboration and activism focused on gender and sexuality—specifically on combating homophobia. The Ohio-based group, who referred to themselves as the *Pink TIGers*, are a teacher activist group made up of a mix of university professors and K–12 teachers, some of whom identify as LGBTQ+ and others who identify as allies (Blackburn et al., 2010). In *Acting out! Combating homophobia through teacher activism* (2010) the Pink TIGers documented their struggles and successes as an educator activist group working to support each other as they fight homophobia in their respective classrooms and contexts. The group, which began meeting once a month in 2004, had fourteen regular participants across four years. The group documented their commitment shift from an inquiry focus to activism. Blackburn described the most consistent goal of their meetings: “to pose dilemmas to one another, get support from one another, consider together the dynamics at play in the dilemma, and rehearse possible responses” (p. 148). Their discussions were often

challenging and uncomfortable. Blackburn argued that a crucial component to their work was the willingness of participants to listen and really hear one another as they were coming from different experiences and different positioning. Blackburn noted, “all of us must be invited to take a strong stand on an issue but then be supported in our efforts to shift our stances or change our philosophical locations” (p. 153). In setting these norms, the group was open to knowledge being fluid and dynamic rather than fixed and static.

Activism, the group emphasized, is not easy or simple. It is challenging, frustrating, and draining. But sharing a consistent dialogical space with others dedicated to the same commitment of fighting homophobia and heterosexism provides a crucial life-support system. The Pink TIGers model the community activism, collaboration, and support I hope to create in this study. In this text, the authors named and described many of the frustrations I have felt in attempting to press against homophobia and heterosexism. Their community of practice did not ease all of their tensions. In fact, they acknowledge the work is tense, unsettling, and often frustrating and slow. But their community group also offered space to collaborate, reflect, and, importantly, rehearse their activism safely.

Conclusion

Over forty years of academic research reveal the transformation in attitude and focus as educational research examines gender, sexuality, and LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula. Beginning with researcher’s concerns over gender equity—first for girls, then for boys—many of the early studies use the term “sex” to refer to gender and assume gender as binary, fixed, and biological. However, their attention on “sex” revealed that all students would benefit from more equitable practices (Sadker & Sadker, 1994; Spender 1982). In response to the need for a radical overhaul of practices, seen as patriarchal, feminist researchers set their focus on how to disrupt teacher

authority, promote community, value student voices, and draw from personal experience. The literature on how teachers address and include gender and sexuality into the curriculum has evolved to include and address issues of the LGBTQ+ community. Queer theory further disrupts systems of oppression as recreated in educational settings. By engaging in queer theory, teachers can disrupt their own binary thinking of gender and sexuality, as well as more subtle forms of sexism, misogyny, heteronormativity, and heterosexism.

Understanding the different thematic stages of gender and sexuality in educational research helps situate this study and highlights the need for it in our current context. The literature on queer inclusive curricula reinforces the reality that teachers are afraid and uncertain as to how to “properly” address gender and sexuality, even when it suddenly becomes policy (Leonardi, 2017; Ullman 2018). Feminist pedagogy offers a design for practices that promote inclusion, diversity, voice, and difficult material both in professional development for teachers and for teachers to implement inclusive material into their own classrooms. Collaboration between and among peers in local contexts may help educators address, reflect on, and work through their fears, as they find support and encouragement from their colleagues (Blackburn et al., 2010; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, 2010; DePalma & Jennett, 2010; Schniedewind & Cathers, 2003).

There are several gaps in the literature that could be further explored. In conducting this review, I noted studies regarding gender nonconforming and gender creative students, or teachers working with this population, remain woefully understudied (Brant, 2016). Furthermore, I was taken aback by how few feminist pedagogy studies I could find outside of the post-secondary, women’s study context. Feminist pedagogy has made its way to K–12 education, though it may not be named as such—at least this is my anecdotal perspective as a secondary teacher practicing

feminist pedagogy. After thirty years of feminist pedagogy reaching beyond the academy, it seems a wide field of possibilities to study: how has feminist pedagogy been taken up in the K–12 contexts? Are educators still hesitant and resistant to identifying as feminists? Are teachers using feminist practices but identifying them by other names and attributions? How effective are feminist practices and processes over time in pressing against the patriarchal institutions of school?

Literature related to queer theory is gaining popularity and traction but the focuses thus far have been narrow in the K–12 context. Many of the studies I reviewed focused on individual ELA teachers selecting texts with queer and inclusive themes. This is important work. But gender and sexuality reach far beyond the ELA classroom. The literature still suggests that many teachers are hesitant and underprepared to address topics related to gender or sexuality. I wondered about the teachers who are ready and willing to at least engage in discussions about these topics. Are teachers talking with one another about sexism? Sexual assault? Homophobia? Heteronormativity? What would happen if teachers were in conversation with one another where they had the opportunity to share, collaborate, dissect, examine, and question the norms related to gender and sexuality that are oppressive?

There are many more possibilities and avenues to consider. In light of the #MeToo movement, #SayHerName, marriage equality, anti-trans bills, rollbacks on Title IX, it is clear that topics of gender, sexuality, feminist pedagogy, and queer pedagogy should not be considered past fads of educational research. In solidarity with an intersectional social justice movement, more studies exploring the intersections of race/racism, sexism, and class would be helpful in moving the field forward to dismantle the oppressions of white supremacy, patriarchy, and neoliberal capitalism.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

In Ohio, there is a group of educators spanning levels, content areas—some researchers at the university level, others practitioners in K–12 context. The group, who call themselves the Pink TIGers, came together in efforts to combat homophobia, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. The work of the Pink TIGers (Blackburn et al., 2010) offered a model for me to pursue a similar collaborative group committed to dialogue, action, allyship, and activism. Upon reading of commitment to social justice, I felt a kinship to their cause:

Our passions for social justice fueled us to pursue equity for LGBTQ people and fight against heterosexism and homophobia in our classrooms, schools, and neighborhoods. . . . Name your passions and find others who share them. Consider teacher inquiry as one approach to the research that will inform your activism—a systematic way to learn from your teaching, your students, and one another. (Blackburn et al., 2010, p. 8)

With their advice in mind, I designed a teacher inquiry study that I hoped would disrupt complacency and build community. The goal of this study was to disrupt conversations (or more often silences) teachers have about gender and sexuality by building a challenging, collaborative, safe, community space for teachers to examine and contextualize their experiences.

In this chapter, I describe the methodology I used, a type of practitioner action research. I will then describe the context and the participants, as this study is particular to our school community and the individuals who came together to build this culture circle. I then describe the actions we took together to transform a usual professional learning community into a Freirean culture circle. Next, I describe my role as a practitioner researcher and my positionality as a feminist and activist. Finally, I detail my methodology for data collection, data analysis, and triangulation.

Practitioner Action Research

Practitioner action research is particular to a setting and context with a unique set of problems that require an investigation into the issue and an action, or set of actions, to change it (Anderson et al., 2007). Action research is both critical and feminist; namely, in its “commitment to process, consensus, building relationships out of a common cause, and working collaboratively to achieve common objectives” (Leavy & Harris, 2019, p. 164). I used *practitioner* action research, as I am an educator, and therefore an insider, working within the school context where I conducted this study to improve both my practice and my school community. The research is twofold: 1) I examined the dialogic sessions of practitioners from my building site who came together to problem pose and problem solve issues related to gender and sexuality we were experiencing in our classrooms and our building; and 2) I analyzed how I facilitated the culture circle using a queer lens.

Anderson et al. (2007) argued that action research is political on two levels: 1) the practitioner asks critical questions about their practice that can disturb the status quo, and 2) the practitioner is active rather than passive, which contests assumptions about how teaching and learning occurs. This study adds a third facet to the political nature: gender and sexuality continue to be contested topics, drawing strong emotional reactions from those who view them as inappropriate for the classroom. One powerful faction in the United States, usually identifying as conservative and Christian, views gender as binary and biological and sexuality as taboo (at best) and sinful (at worst). In this study, I take a political position that firmly opposes this viewpoint. I begin with the belief, which has become politicized, that gender and sexuality are both spectrums that should be discussed in classroom discourse and addressed in curricula at all levels and in all content areas.

In using practitioner action research, I conducted an inquiry into how participating in the culture circle influenced my choices as the facilitator, as an activist ally, and as a practitioner. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) explained, “inquiry as stance redefines leaders as learners and thus blurs the boundaries between leaders and followers, between those framing the problems and those implementing the changes in response to those problems” (p. 123). As the facilitator, I was both leader (a role I continually struggled with) and learner (a role I find very comfortable). As I studied our collaborative sessions, I focused on the ways in which a collaborative inquiry group navigated the fears, frustrations, conflicts, and uncertainties teachers have in creating inclusive curricula and in combating systems of oppression tied to gender and sexuality, such as homophobia, sexism, misogyny, heteronormativity, and heterosexism. With an understanding that my findings are not necessarily generalizable because they are particular to our context, the findings from this study provide one example of what is possible when a group of teachers engage in critical conversations about gender and sexuality, pose problems, and take actions (Anderson et al., 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Leavy & Harris, 2019).

As the facilitator researching within my school context, I recruited members from the faculty who are interested in discussing gender and sexuality. In the fall of 2019, I sent out an email inquiry to gather interest in such a collaboration. In November of 2019, I received approval from my principal to conduct research at our building site. The same month, I applied to the Institutional Review Boards (IRB) for approval of this study. Our collaborative group met every two to four weeks, depending on our school schedule and our agreed upon availability. From November 2019 to June of 2020, we met in ten sessions with each session averaging between 30 and 60 minutes (though, our later virtual sessions often extended beyond two hours). The goals of the group were democratically established and negotiated during the first session to

establish our shared expectations for what we hoped to achieve through this PLC (Bohny et al., 2016; Cook, 1992). As a group, we continued to negotiate most aspects of the PLC's operations, including which topics we discussed, pieces we read or viewed, and actions we took.

Practitioner action research provides a valuable conduit to build a democratic community and collaboration (Anderson et al., 2007). Anderson et al. (2007) noted the common problem that PLCs have become “co-opted by a top-down reform movement” (p. 15) that has made it yet another cumbersome, mandated item on an ever-growing checklist of accountability. By transforming this PLC into a culture circle, I sought to reclaim collaborative inquiry as a grassroots method engaging participants in dialogue and action of their own choosing. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) described, taking this inquiry stance means “working both within and against the system . . . problematizing fundamental assumptions . . . and raising difficult questions” (p. 146). The questions of how to implement inclusive practices and curricula are pressing and difficult questions that problematize our assumptions and push against the system as it is. Like DePalma and Jennett (2010) hoped, this study may add one more island in a chain that will “join up with other small islands of change, and that these will inspire others, so that eventually homophobia and transphobia themselves become aberrations rather than part of the accepted norm” (p. 24).

Local Context

Minasian High School (pseudonym) in Northern New Jersey is an academically competitive, suburban high school in an affluent district with a high-performance rating and a 97% graduation rate (New Jersey Department of Education, 2016). The student population is 58% White, 30% Asian, 4.9% Hispanic, 1.6% Black, and 4.9% two or more races (NJDOE, 2016). Approximately, one percent of the district receives free or reduced price lunch. This year,

the administration and Board of Education set a district-wide goal: “To eliminate anti-bias language and expression, and to increase the awareness of cultural diversity and global awareness” (MSD, 2019-2020 District Goals). This district goal aligns with recent strides toward adopting culturally responsive practices, which has parent support in the district. In general, the community promotes inclusion, including active commitment to supporting transitioning students (e.g. allowing students to use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identification, changing students’ names on their I.D. badges, and in the school’s email and online grading system).

In 2010, the senior class elected a transgender student as prom queen, possibly the first in that nation (Rae, 2017). The high school boasts an active Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) and most teachers have Safe Space stickers visible on the doors to their classrooms. Additionally, the school district has responded to New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy’s (2018) legislation requiring school districts include LGBTQ+ history in the curriculum by inviting the non-profit organization Garden State Equality to conduct an optional one-day professional development focused on inclusive curriculum. In this context, Minasian School District provides a sample of teachers who may be better prepared, motivated, and supported to discuss gender and sexuality than practitioners in more conservative districts and states.

Participants

All content teachers at our high school were invited to participate via email. The participants self-select to join this collaboration based on their interest in social justice, equity, gender, and sexuality. Our culture circle consisted of fifteen secondary educators from three content departments: two special education teachers, four social studies teachers, and nine English teachers. Thirteen of the participants identify as women; two identify as men. One

openly identifies as lesbian. The rest identify as cisgender and heterosexual or preferred not to disclose. All participants identified as allies to the LGBTQ+ community. One individual is Asian American; the other participants are white. Our years of teaching experience ranged from first-year novices to tenured veterans with fifteen or more years of teaching in their content field; six participants were non-tenured. Each participant selected their own pseudonym for reference in this study.

As Minasian High School requires staff to participate in PLCs each year, our collaborative group fulfilled a district professional development requirement (though many faculty participate in several PLCs beyond the district requirement). Additionally, this collaboration met the Superintendent's district-wide goal to work toward "anti-bias language" under a larger social justice initiative (MHS District Goals, 2019). Participating in this study will allow participants to set personal goals that align with this district goal, which they can reference in their end of year evaluations. I do not supervise any of my colleagues and do not evaluate them as teachers or as participants in this study.

What We Did: Professional Learning Communities as Freirean Culture Circles

Critical, feminist, and queer theories and pedagogies informed the design and implementation of this study. Critical theory focuses on dismantling systems of power that divide students by class; poststructural feminist theory questions patriarchal structures and, instead, seeks to build classrooms as collaborative spaces rooted in egalitarian community. Queer theory and pedagogy continue the critical practices by further disrupting the normative and the binary by confronting systems of power based on heteronormativity and heterosexism. I used Freire's culture circle model to form the design of our group's sessions. Anderson et al. (2007) likened Freire's culture circles to participatory action research.

Our school context does not employ culture circles as a practice. However, we do engage in *professional learning communities* (PLCs) to describe groups of teachers collaborating about best practices, problems of practice, or curriculum design (Owen, 2016). Teachers are required to participate in two PLCs each academic year as part of our district's professional development responsibilities. The requirement provided an opportunity for this study. To challenge and queer the traditional PLC collaboration, I modeled our group sessions using Paulo Freire's (1970/2004) culture circles. Unlike the traditional PLCs, this meant a commitment to equity rather than measurable gains in standards or skills (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Souto-Manning (2010) described:

Participants then engage in problem posing, seeking to do away with innocent and simplistic views of the world or any specific situation, looking critically at, and transforming the situation in place. Transformation happens through dialogue and problem solving in cyclical and recursive processes which leads to transformative action.
(p. 19)

Dialogue, critical examination, and community make up the foundation of Freire's critical pedagogy, as well as feminist pedagogy and the consciousness raising study groups that preceded it. Weiler (1991) noted the visions, values, and processes Freire's culture circles shared with the consciousness raising groups of the women's liberation movement. Both hold commitments to ending oppression and pursuing social justice. Both bring individuals together in community to engage in critical discussion and reflection about their experiences, their oppression, and their ideas for action. Weiler (1991) suggested that feminist pedagogy could be used to push Freirean pedagogy to further consider the different forms of oppression that individuals experience in a spectrum of intersecting identities: class *with* gender and sexuality and race and other identity

positions taken into account. Together, Freirean culture circles and feminist consciousness raising groups offered a liberatory model to apply to our PLC.

Participants in culture circles draw from their experience, knowledge, and immediate oppressions to “read the word and the world” (Freire & Macedo, 1987). According to Freire (1970/2004), the engagement of the group in dialogue is the central process that promotes critical thinking: “only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue, there is no communication, and without communication there can be no true education” (pp. 92–93). Similarly, in consciousness raising (CR) groups, providing dedicated time for each woman to have a speaking turn, usually at the beginning and/or end of a session, was a standard practice (Freedman, 1990; hooks, 2015). About her experience in CR groups, hooks explained, “Only through discussion and disagreement could we begin to find a realistic standpoint on gender exploitation and oppression” (p. 8). Both CR groups and culture circles offer a place to “interrogate society through shared interpretation of knowledge and their material reality” (Magill & Rodriguez, 2019, p. 56). Souto-Manning (2010) applied Freirean culture circles in a variety of teacher education contexts, revealing the flexibility and possibility of dialogic communities at all grade levels and contexts where teachers are learners engaged with one another. Souto-Manning facilitated culture circles with a first-grade class, adult learners, pre-service teachers, and in-service teachers in *Freire, Teaching, and Learning*. The process of the culture circle “promotes the problematization of injustices and inequalities contesting unfair realities” (p. 9).

To structure Freire’s (1970/2004) culture circle model for application across various contexts, Souto-Manning (2010) developed a five-stage critical and recursive process: a) generative themes b) problem posing c) dialogue, d) problem solving, e) action. I did not share

this critical cycle with the group, nor did I try to steer our work to follow this process. Still, our group naturally followed a similar cycle (with the exception of the first phase). In the first stage, facilitators who are outsiders complete an ethnographic study of the participants' classrooms and school context. As an insider of the district and a fellow participant in the circle, I did not generate my own themes. Rather, we generated themes together that focused on the issues we were facing in our classrooms and in our school community. We established goals and norms as a group in our initial meetings, then revised these informally across sessions. Continuing with the critical cycle, we posed problems, concerns, and confusion. Together, we questioned, considered, and planned how to address these problems. Eventually, we took deliberate actions to address the problems we discussed. For us, this method was liberatory, though not all collaborations are empowering simply because facilitators intend for them to be (Ellsworth, 1992). Liberation can take the form of empowerment, confidence, ownership of new ideas and practices, and finding collective support to face problems and resistance from those in power.

My Role as Practitioner Researcher/Facilitator

As a high school educator, I am committed to social justice, which includes studying and problematizing race/ism, gender and sexuality, and class/ism. For several years, I have employed critical literary theory to teach a unit focused on gender and sexuality as related to power and identity in an Advanced Placement English Language and Composition course. Recently, I have also identified myself to my students as a feminist educator on the first day of school. I do so in the interest of open disclosure. In feminist pedagogy, the practitioner discloses her positionality clearly, not to call into question her biases but to acknowledge and draw the feminist lens to the forefront (Seymour, 2007). I theorized that my high school students would benefit from knowing my positionality. Several times, however, I have wondered whether or not being an out feminist

educator alienates some students or discourages others from even taking my courses. The PTO parent's comment about *feminazis* described in the introduction of this dissertation suggested I have reason for such pause.

In identifying as a feminist, I have met some resistance; but as a visible ally to the LGBTQ+ community, I have experienced slightly more understanding from the administration and our community who tend to be socially progressive. In my classroom, I have displayed a PRIDE American flag, a RESIST trans flag, ally stickers, Black Lives Matter stickers, and a Safe Space marker on my classroom door. But I recognize that presenting publicly as an ally is not the same as teaching and enacting anti-biased language, anti-oppressive practices, and anti-oppressive curriculum. I struggled with making the changes to my language, my practices and my curriculum that would be more inclusive of all genders and actively dismantle the oppression of binary gender roles, heterosexism, and heteronormativity. I wondered if my colleagues felt the same.

In this study, I sought to engage my colleagues in dialogue about the challenges we were experiencing attempting to do social justice work related to gender and sexuality. In designing this dissertation study, one of my primary concerns was maintaining a researcher role that aligned with my values and ethics as a feminist. It was in discussion with a critical friends group for a class on advanced qualitative research that helped me design a participant / researcher role I felt comfortable performing—in particular, I wanted to participate in the study and share power with the participants (Leavy & Harris, 2019). To align with this feminist ideal, I facilitated the initial organization, planning, and meeting to create the group but made continual efforts to reduce my role as leader in favor of an egalitarian model. These practices included sharing leadership responsibilities, co-constructing knowledge, negotiating our curriculum, and creating

a safe, collaborative space where all voices were heard, respected, and acknowledged (Anderson et al., 2007; Bohny et al., 2016; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; hooks, 1984; Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009; Leavy & Harris, 2019; Souto-Manning, 2010).

Insider and Outsider Positionality. I am both a participant in this research and the principal investigator. I have been an English teacher at Minasian High School for 14 years. Over this time, I have worked closely with several of my colleagues, many of whom participated in this study, in creating curriculum and addressing school culture issues (including later start times, student stress, ethics and academic integrity, and student voices/participation). As such, I am situated as an insider of this community. Unlike my colleagues, I am a doctoral candidate in the Teacher Education and Teacher Development program at Montclair State University. The other participants were aware that this collaboration was the basis for my dissertation study. Whereas my colleagues' participation fulfilled their district requirements to participate in a PLC and met the district goal of using anti-bias language, they knew I had another fulfillment and responsibility to meet. In this way, my role as a doctoral candidate situated me as a partial outsider as my aims and intentions slightly differed from the rest of the participants.

I anticipated that my insider/outsider position might influence the study. One concern was that my colleagues, many of whom are friends I have worked with for several years, may have participated in this study out of kindness, friendship, and loyalty to me rather than out of a personal commitment to social justice work related to gender and sexuality. One participant, my co-teacher Charlie, sometimes asked if what they were offering in our sessions was “helping” me. These comments suggested that friendship, empathy, and concern for me as a doctoral student all played a role in at least her participation with the group. As the participants work together in varying degrees of closeness—some are first year teachers who do not know anyone

very well and others are veterans with many years of experience together—I also have concerns about the existing relationships preceding our collaboration: inevitably, some educators will be closer to one another than with others. At times, my friendship with some might interfere with my need to be a fair facilitator and researcher. Will those I am not as close to feel excluded from a smaller, more exclusive group within the group? How do I avoid members feeling excluded? How do I mediate conflicts between group members without taking on a role of power and authority?

My Positioning as Feminist and Ally. My commitment to feminist pedagogy comes from my experiences as a woman with a penchant for questioning power, authority, and norms. I identify as a feminist, an ally, a questioner, a nonconformist, and an activist. Like Audre Lorde (1984), I see my identity as multifaceted, each portion influencing how I perceive the world and perform in the world. I identify as a white, cisgender, heterosexual woman—in a profession where 77% of educators in the United States are women and 80% are white; demographically, I am the norm. My identity as a cis/het ally to the queer community challenged me to see the need for straight identifying cisgender teachers to understand and adopt queer and feminist (or queerly feminist) pedagogical and inquiry practices.

While my practices and beliefs of nonconformity may push against the traditional definition and notions of being an educator, I can never fully understand the experience of teaching as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, which in some U.S. contexts still puts one's job security at risk (Endo et al., 2010). My choices to resist conformity—visible nose piercing, tattoos, and dyed purple hair—mark my privileged identities (white, cis/het). I feel safe in these actions and have faced little repercussions to my reputation or career. While I cannot understand a queer perspective from the position of a queer identifying educator, I am committed to

queering my perspective and my pedagogy. Though I have never claimed membership in the LGBTQ+ community beyond my role as an ally and activist, in the course of this research I came to view myself on the *aromantic* continuum (having little or no desire for romantic relationships). I am drawn to hooks' (2014) explanation of her own identification as “queer past gay” and her vision of queer as a relationship with the world beyond a sexual preference. She explained:

Queer as not belonging as the essence of queer . . . queer not as being about who you are having sex with—that can be a dimension of it—but queer as being about the self that is at odds with everything around it. And has to invent and create and find a place to speak and to thrive and to live. (The New School)

Having often felt at odds with my community, her words resonated with me. Many educators who identify as straight, might not align with the vision of the heteronormative worldview. Seeing gender expression, gender identity, and sexual preference all as continuums of possibility, I have come to question and reconsider even my identification as a straight woman. Studying and immersing myself in queer theory has unfixed much of my identity that I avoided questioning. Thus, unfixing my perception of my identity opens up possibilities and helps me to practice being “queerly intelligible” (Ruffolo, 2007, p. 256).

Data Collection Methods

I collected data across eight months as our culture circle PLC met once or twice per month. My qualitative data came from several sources: transcriptions of our audio-recorded or video-recorded group sessions, emails, Google documents, Google Classroom posts, Google surveys and my researcher's journal. Responding to the surveys sent at the midway point and closing point of this study was optional for all participants. All members had access to our

documents via a shared Google folder and shared Google Classroom. All materials were password protected by our Gmail accounts provided by the school district.

Audio recording, Video recording, and Transcription

I audio-recorded sessions 1–8 using the Voice Recorder application on my cell phone to preserve our discussions for later analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). During one session where I forgot my phone, a participant recorded on her own device, shared it with me, and deleted it from her cell phone. I transferred the recordings to a password protected folder on my laptop, which is also password protected. The original recordings were deleted from my cell phone device. In this transfer, I accidentally deleted the recording for our seventh session (10 February 2020) before saving the recording properly, though I did have notes, agenda, and my journal reflections. I purposefully did not record our ninth meeting. This session (14 May 2021) was our first meeting following the imposed quarantine in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We did keep a Google Doc to collect our notes from this session. I made the choice not to record as a way to mitigate the formality of meeting over Google Meets and to prioritize care and reconnecting. All members agreed to be video recorded as well as audio recorded for session 10, our last session, on 17 June 2021 (for the purpose of this study).

The recordings of the other eight will be saved for three years as per the guidelines of the Institutional Review Board. I transcribed each session myself, as suggested by Merriam and Tisdell (2016) who argued that it increases “familiarity with your data” (p. 132). The transcripts were also saved in a password protected folder and kept confidential. Only members of the culture circle had access and invitation to listen to the recordings and to review the transcripts.

Google Docs, Google Classroom, Google Surveys

Our school district uses a Google platform and all faculty members are issued a Macbook Air. Two years ago, we began a one-to-one initiative issuing Chromebooks to all students. As such, we are encouraged and trained to use Google Classroom and Google Docs as part of our daily practice. Our content area and grade level teams use a shared Google Drive to co-create and collaborate on unit plans and daily lesson plans, using the *Understanding by Design* (UBD) framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998/2005). Our experience and comfort level with the Google platform made sharing and co-creating documents a natural and essential part of our collaborative process. In our shared folder, participants had access to our meeting agendas and notes, as well as several articles from *Rethinking Sexism, Gender & Sexuality* (Butler-Wall et al., 2016), including a Glossary of Terms (Butler-Wall, 2016) and the article we read together following our first session: “The New Misogyny: What It Means for Teachers and Classrooms” (Butler-Wall et al., 2016).

I posted several Google Surveys to the group. Most of the surveys were short requests for dates and times for our next sessions or topics and questions for participants to pose for the group’s consideration. Two of the surveys were optional reflections: one midway through our school year (23 January 2021) and one at the end of the school year (23 June 2021). At the midway point, I offered the following prompts: 1) Describe your experience participating in this PLC (If you have participated in others in the past, you could offer a comparison/contrast). 2) Optional Reflection: How do you feel about sharing the leadership of the PLC? What ideas do you have to share leadership and responsibility moving forward? (Optional Reflection, 23 January 2021). In the closing reflection survey, I asked: 1) Describe your experience participating in this PLC: What are your thoughts, feelings, and take-aways? And 2) What ideas, vision, or hopes do you have for the PLC moving forward? (Optional Reflection, 23 June 2021).

In our dedicated Google Classroom site, we collected email drafts, resources, meeting agendas/notes, and surveys. On this page, every member was able to post messages to the group, attach reading material, edit notes, access shared resources, and comment on one another's posts. The Google Classroom site was a shared community space where all members had equal access. In an attempt to share power, I added all of the participants as "teachers" rather than as "students." I did not want to be the sole "teacher" on the Google Classroom page because of the implicit power and authority this designation suggests. So, I asked if the participants would like to be added as teachers or as students. We agreed to add everyone as teachers, which had benefits and drawbacks. In Google Classroom, students have the ability to post *announcements* to the class stream (which could include attachments and links) but only those designated "teachers" can create *assignments* and post *questions* (a particular type of post where the students are able to reply and see each other's responses). Herein lies the drawback: when a *question* was posted, the teachers were not able to leave a reply as students normally would. In one of our sessions, we joked about asking Google to create a type of Google Classroom that was designed for teachers to work with teachers. We imagined names for it like "Google Faculty Lounge" (Transcript 10, 17 June 2020). (I maintain that Google should offer a collaborative and non-hierarchical space for educators to work together; I plan on proposing it to them.) In our last few sessions, we also purposefully designated one volunteer, Charlie, to be a "student" so that a participant who left our district could be listed as her "parent" and still receive access to our PLC's Classroom page without her former Minasian Gmail account (a small rebellion against the District's rules).

Researcher's Journal

Throughout the course of this study, I kept a researcher's journal as a primary data source documenting the experience in my own words "as a personal case history" (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 208). After each meeting of our culture circle PLC, I spent 15–45 minutes reflecting on the session (although, I sometimes forgot or delayed my responses). In these reflexive writing sessions, I was "in conversation with [myself] about [my] ideas, associations, and feelings" (Luttrell, 2010, p. 469). As Luttrell (2010) described, the purpose of reflexive writing "is to make your thinking visible" (p. 469). As an English teacher, the value of journaling is embedded in my practice as a teacher of language and a teacher of stories. I also used reflective journals as a graduate student in responding to challenging class material and class experiences about theory, praxis, and research (Bohny et al., 2016). Thus, I understand the power of writing as a way to process through my emotions and experiences as I push my thinking, explore new ideas, ask questions, pose hypotheticals, and even invite tangents (Coia & Taylor, 2006; Taylor & Coia, 2019). My entries ranged from logs that recount my experiences with the culture circle to more personal storytelling where I expressed emotional responses—frustration, anger, joy, confusion—to events beyond our sessions in my classroom and in my interactions with administrators over social justice activism (Anderson et al., 2007; McKernan, 1991).

I set out to focus on myself as the facilitator examining how I attempted to share leadership and to queer my facilitation of our circle—I planned to disrupt my boundaries, norms, and assumptions recursively. But oftentimes, I stumbled on what it meant to actually queer my facilitation or even how to reflect on it. In one entry, I posed the question: "How is queer theory pushing me to disrupt my notions of collaboration and leadership and self-study?" (Researcher's Journal, 23 January 2020) but I did not attempt to answer it directly. Maimon (2009) suggested

that writing is an important method for teachers to continue being learners and to make meaning out of the emotional work that is teaching. In his words: “writing helps to make the inherent emotionality of the work generative rather than debilitating” (p. 214). I used journaling in much the same way: to make sense of what I was doing and what we were doing, to help me see more clearly, and to work through the emotional work involved in teaching, facilitating, and activism. In my journal, I worked out my thinking about some of our tenuous interactions with administrators. I also collected quotes and research material, adding notes to myself to return to specific readings later.

Data Analysis Methods: Queer Theory

Queer theory was the analytical tool I used to analyze our culture circle’s dialogue and my facilitation. However, my first rounds of data analysis followed more traditional qualitative methods. Using the constant comparative method (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), I analyzed the data recursively—in part, as we were still meeting and between sessions—but the bulk of the time analyzing occurred in the weeks and months following the close of the school year and our official sessions.

To begin analysis of our group’s transcripts, I used inductive coding to see what emerged from the data. In the first stage, I used “open coding” (Charmaz, 2014). Saldaña’s (2016) preferred method for initial coding, which he termed “pragmatic eclecticism” (p. 70), emphasized an open perspective to using coding that is appropriate and substantive to analysis but does not restrict to one particular coding type. My first round of coding followed this open perspective. I also used descriptive coding and In Vivo Coding. Saldaña argued that In Vivo Codes, focused on phrases and word choices used by the participants, which help “zoom in on the emotional dimensions of the story” since they are “more action oriented” (p. 77).

Furthermore, Saldaña described In Vivo Coding as a method that is particularly helpful for beginning qualitative researchers and those involved in practitioner research, as it helps the researcher listen to individual voices and experiences. In further cycles of coding, I used Pattern Coding to group together and condense the initial codes into major themes.

I coded in several iterations with some periods of time away from the data to look for new insights. As Berger (2013) explained, “Such time lapse offers an opportunity to view the same material through ‘new lens’” (p. 12). Berger further suggested comparing pre- and post-analyses to examine for discrepancies. It was in this process of taking pauses from the data and returning to it with new lenses that I came to better understand queer theory as an analytical tool. Initially, I simply looked for queer moments: initially, with a focus on the content of our discussions. Then, as I returned to the literature, I pushed myself to see beyond the boundaries of queer as content to look for queer in our disruptions, rebellions, questions, practices, wondering, and interactions with one another (Shlasko, 2005). I needed to read the data queerly (Britzman, 1998) and to queer my gaze (Blaise & Taylor, 2012; Luhmann, 1998; Ruffolo, 2007). I used queer theory to look for the ambiguous and the subversive. Luhmann explained, “Subversiveness, rather than being an easily identifiable counter-knowledge, lies in the very moment of unintelligibility, or in the absence of knowledge” (p. 147). The elusive nature of queer theory posed several challenges for me in attempting to employ queer theory as my analytical lens. Namely, that queer theorists resist pinpointing a particular set of methods (Shlasko, 2005). Shlasko (2005) argued, both queer theory and other progressive pedagogies, like feminism, “critically examine processes of normalization and reproductions of power relationships, and complicate understandings of presumed binary categories” (p. 125). This is the primary way I used queer theory: to examine power and to complicate my initial analyses. I used

queer theory to resist absolutes and firm conclusions and instead look for further possibilities and opportunities for multiple understandings.

Trustworthiness

My close proximity to the research and the participants will likely have paradoxical effects on the trustworthiness of the study. I have a subjective view of the topic of gender and sexuality and of the other participants, most of whom I have known for years. My investment in the study is both personal and professional. Being close to a topic does not mean I am ill-suited to study it, merely that my closeness to it must be taken into account. Berger (2013) viewed her own research in much the same way: she perceived many benefits to being an insider with a shared experience and closeness to the material. In her words, it made her “better equipped with insights and the ability to understand implied content, and was more sensitized to certain dimensions of the data” (p. 5). On the other hand, closeness to the data and the participants may have affected power dynamics, how stories were told and whose stories were told. Closeness muddies the boundaries (though, queer theory seeks to muddy the boundaries purposefully and playfully). Reflexivity is key in establishing trustworthiness.

I use “trustworthiness” rather than “validity” since the design of the study is feminist, qualitative, and collaborative (Coia & Taylor; 2009; Lyons & LaBoskey, 2002). Anderson et al. (2007) offered several criteria that can be used to establish trustworthiness particular to action research or practitioner research: outcome, process (triangulation), democratic, catalytic, and dialogic. To establish outcome trustworthiness of this study, we needed to go beyond merely establishing problems and move into taking deliberate and meaningful actions. We could not “solve” all of the problems related to gender and sexuality that we experienced in our classrooms

and our school context, but we did take appropriate actions that worked towards solutions and change.

To build process trustworthiness of my analyses, I used triangulation with co-collaborators “comparing and cross-checking data” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 245). Triangulation refers to the inclusion of multiple perspectives and/or multiple data sources that can be used to establish the credibility of the findings. To triangulate, I invited the perspectives of co-collaborators to examine and offer feedback on my researcher’s journal, my coding, our transcripts, and drafts of my findings. They also offered feedback during sessions and in the midway point and endpoint optional surveys. I also triangulated using multiple points of data. My researcher’s journal can be cross-checked by the transcripts from our audio-recorded and video-recorded sessions and through the digital communication kept between members via email and the Google platform. Together, these data sources provided a consistent and reliable audit trail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Catalytic trustworthiness, according to Lather (1986), is “the degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward knowing reality in order to transform it” (as cited in Anderson et al., 2007, p. 42). Anderson et al. (2007) further described catalytic trustworthiness as the movement which occurs in both my and the participants’ depth of understanding and measure of transformation. They identified the researcher’s journal as an important tool for documenting the process of change and growth in the researcher and in the group. I found my researcher’s journal to be an invaluable source to capture my feelings, thoughts, and actions in particular moments of change, transformation, and action. Finally, I used dialogic trustworthiness at several points. Since my intention was to promote collaboration and open communication, I invited my co-collaborators to review my researcher’s journal, as well as

the analyses about our group's collaborations. On a volunteer basis, participants had the opportunity to provide their own coding, comment on mine, and offer feedback and suggestions. My colleagues have a great deal of knowledge and experience with inquiry, reflection, collaboration, critical thinking, grading, drawing themes, and offering focused feedback. Their perspectives also represented the many various ways individuals can read and interpret shared experiences.

In this chapter, I established my framework of queer theory to guide my analysis of the data from this study. I described the data I would collect, including audio recording, video recording (following our move to a virtual environment), emails, co-created Google documents and surveys, as well as posts and comments left on our Google Classroom page. Following, in chapter 4, I offer a narrative account interwoven with my analysis of critical incidents across four cycles: 1) community building, 2) storytelling and problem posing, 3) problem solving, and 4) action and activism.

CHAPTER 4: A Narrative and Analysis of Findings

In the introduction to his memoir, *Heavy*, Kiese Laymon (2018) wrote,

I wanted to write a lie.

I wanted that lie to be titillating.

I wrote that lie.

It was titillating.

You would have loved it.

I discovered nothing.

You would have loved it.

I started over and wrote what we hoped I'd forget. (p. 2)

I find myself wanting to write a lie—A nice beginning. Enlightening realizations. Brilliant findings. A neat linear experience from then to now that offers a crisply folded roadmap for all future teacher groups hoping to discuss and challenge the ways we address gender and sexuality in our classrooms. But the truth is messier. There is no roadmap. From beginning to ending, I cannot promise to offer much more concrete than this beginning: to queer is to question and to push boundaries (Britzman, 1998; Luhmann, 1998; Morris, 1998; Shlasko, 2005; Waite, 2019). Questions I can do; boundary pushing I will attempt. But conclusions? Likely not.

Freire (2009) said, “My philosophical conviction is that we did not come to keep the world as it is. We came to the world in order to remake the world. We have to change reality” (*LiteracyDotOrg*). Like Freire, I did not come to this work to keep myself or my community where we are. I came to this work to change myself and (hopefully) my community. My colleagues who agreed to share in this difficult work together were also committed to change. Transformational change does not happen in neat, incremental steps, though it sometimes does.

Transformational change does not happen in broad, sweeping upheavals, though it sometimes does.

I have written this chapter as a narrative description of my experience participating in and facilitating a teacher group that attempted to spend a year in dialogue about how we approach gender and sexuality in our classrooms and our practices. I use narrative as one way to experiment with queering my thinking and the presentation of my findings (Miller, 1998; Whitlock, 2010). At points, I was tempted to say that we failed or that we succeeded. I am still tempted. I am tempted to identify clearly defined themes and uniformly developed stages. My work with queer theory has helped me to resist these temptations: it is a process that is ongoing, layered, incomplete, imperfect, and ambiguous (Britzman, 1998; Martin & Kitchen, 2020; Shlasko, 2005). In many ways, I have conformed necessarily to the structures, norms, and guidelines of academic writing (e.g. APA formatting and the guidelines for an appropriate dissertation according to Montclair State University). In other ways, some negligible, I have attempted to subvert the structure of a traditional dissertation (Waite, 2019). I have come to value most acts of deliberate resistance—no matter how small or seemingly insignificant.

Rather than stages, I have referred to the four sections as “cycles”—a reference to the way our work was cyclical and recursive rather than linear (Souto-Manning, 2010). Alternatively, Coia and Taylor (2006) used the phrase “spiral process” (p. 30) to describe their recursive feminist process of using autobiography with students, which may also be applicable here. I have chosen four cycles to highlight, though I could have broken down our work in several more (or less). I have chosen not to organize by theme, though themes are present and apparent. Instead, I have told this story chronologically in an attempt to emphasize the entangled process of how a group of teachers built a community and moved toward activism (Ringrose &

Niccolini, 2020). Though, I admit, chronological order is decidedly not a queer approach to structure and time; it is a useful structure here. In each cycle, I have marked one or several critical incidents that shaped our community and influenced our trajectory. After each cycle and critical incident, I have followed with an analysis of my attempts to queer my feminist facilitation of our group. I used queer theory to disrupt my notions of myself and what it means to be a feminist facilitator and a member of a dialogic community. From Waite (2019), with gratitude, I experimented (or attempted to) with the following suggestions:

1. Commit rhetorical disobedience. . . .
2. Write from a position of failure instead of writing from the position of what you think you know. . . .
4. Don't stay "on topic." Drift gleefully off. Get lost. . . .
8. Get academic; get theoretical; get narrative; get personal. "The assumption, I suppose, is that the 'personal' isn't critical, isn't socially responsible because it encourages a solipsistic narcissism, of knowledge production" (Banks, 2003, p. 21). Solipsistic narcissism, why not? It might be fun. . . .
10. Approach writing as an act of discovery and experimentation. "I don't know what I'm looking for, really. I just have a bundle of 'interest' and proclivities. I'm really just screwing around" (Ramsay, 2014, p. 117).
11. Be irrational, hysterical even. . . .
36. You can't quite write queer, but try: "Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality" (Muñoz, 2009, p. 1). . . .
40. Get disorganized, make a mess. (pp. 43–46).

Waite's list of ways to queer writing is not so much a guideline as it is a loose set of reminders: to queer is to disrupt and subvert whatever the norms are in a particular context (Britzman, 1998; Kitchen, 2014; Pennell, 2016; Tierney & Dilley, 1998; Whitlock, 2010). Will I know whether or not I have ~~successfully~~ queered my feminist facilitation? The question itself poses problems: first, what is success? So, delete the adjective: will I know whether or not I have queered my feminist facilitation? *How* will I know? Queer theorists resist prescriptive checklists and frameworks but there are a few agreed upon methods. Referencing Britzman's (1998) three methods—the study of limits, ignorance, and reading practices—I will resist answering in the affirmative or the negative but continually ask myself more questions. To study limits: How have I/we transgressed norms, binaries, and thinking? To study ignorance: How have I/we challenged what we know, don't know, and think we know? To study reading practices: How have I/we disrupted our interpretations? In this case, the “reading” refers to my reading of our group through our transcripts, documents, emails, etc. Like Kumashiro (2002), I acknowledge and welcome many different potential readings of the data presented here.

Cycle 1: Who Are We, and What Were We Doing Here?

The day of our first meeting, I was all nerves and energy. My co-teacher, Charlie, asked after our 8th period class, “Are you ready?” I had no answer. I felt the same kinds of nerves, excitement, and terror that I do on the first day of school and before every Back to School Night. Part fear of my performance, part fear of the unknown, part excitement at the potential for what will be. I wondered: Will this culture circle work the way I imagine it? Will I lead it in a feminist way? How can I queer my views and practices of facilitation? Will they want to participate? My hope was to foster a feminist, democratic, collaborative space. My hope was for our teacher community to be a meaningful experience. But how do you make an experience meaningful?

At our first session, we were a group of twelve (including me). Harper, Grace, Liz, Draco, Sara, Mary, Antoinette, and I teach English. Charlie, my co-teacher, is in the special education department. Rebecca, Veronica, and Michelle teach history (Michelle also teaches a women's studies elective). Eleven of twelve identified as cisgender women. Eleven of twelve identified as white. Eleven of twelve identified as heterosexual. Twelve of twelve identified as cisgender. At our second meeting, we were joined by Joan (white, cis/het woman, English), and Tyler (white, cis/het man, history). A few sessions later, Dale joined us (white, cis/het woman, special education), and later, Paige (white, cis/het woman, history). Across gender, race, sexuality, and even content specialty, we were not a diverse group: a point we often discussed and bemoaned.

I began with an introduction to explain my positioning and reasoning for bringing this group together:

So, this idea came out of talks with my classmates about how I would do a study that was less patriarchal and more feminist . . . that it's a collaboration, it's a dialogue, that it's everybody's voices all in this together, and that action will come out of—hopefully, will come out of—our dialogue. (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019)

In doing so, I named my values and hopes for our group: feminism, collaboration, dialogue, and action. I then invited the group members to join a shared document. At the top were two prompts followed by a list of blank bullet points. The prompts read:

- What would this collaboration look like and sound like if it were the best PLC you've been part of?
- What would this collaboration look like and sound like if it were the least effective PLC you've ever been part of?

I invited my eleven colleagues to grab a bullet point and to begin describing their expectations for this PLC. And so, we began.

A Process of Becoming

The questions and the collaborative opening activity were a deliberate move to prioritize participants' voices in shaping our community together. I knew from my classroom experiences and from my reading of feminist pedagogy that the process of building community can unfold in countless ways. Many teachers spend the first few days of a new school year purposefully building classroom community through icebreakers, group initiatives, and get-to-know-you surveys. Other teachers dive straight into content and allow the community building to form in its own due course. Building community does not magically happen. And it does not spring into existence in one forty-minute session. That said, the initial meeting of any newly formed community sets the tone, expectations, and purpose: a crucial foundation for a burgeoning group coming together to dialogue and critically examine their experiences.

I drew from my understanding of feminist pedagogy and critical pedagogy: in particular, ways to share power and disrupt traditional authoritarian power (Bohny et al., 2016; Brown, 1992; Copp & Kleinman, 2008; Ellsworth, 1992; Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; Freire, 1970/2004; Kenway & Modra, 1992; Roy & Shen, 1987), drawing on personal experience (Berry & Black, 1987; Brown, 1992; Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; hooks, 1994; Lewis, 1993; Quilty, 2017; Romney et al., 1992; Weedon, 1987/1997). I also drew from literature about feminist community building to encourage dialogue where all members' voices are heard and valued (Briskin 1990; Files-Thompson, 2018; hooks, 1994; Hunzer, 2005; Remlinger, 2005; Roffman, 1994; Rosser, 1990; Schniedewind, 1987; Seymour, 2007; Woodbridge, 1994). hooks (1994) described community as a "shared commitment and a common good that binds us" built through "the value

of each individual voice” (p. 40). A shared commitment, we had. But engaging participants’ voices safely does not happen just by virtue of wanting a feminist, democratic space (Ellsworth, 1992; Manicom, 1992). To begin engaging every participant’s voice, the only planned activity I prepared was for the group to negotiate our expectations and to set our “curriculum” together (Bohny et al., 2016; Cook, 1992; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009; Jacobi & Becker, 2013). My intention was for us to work collaboratively on our expectations and goals so that we would have a clear understanding of what we wanted to create and achieve together. To aid negotiations, I set up a shared Google document for the group members to access from our Google Classroom page. Using a shared document gave room for participants to voice ideas in a relatively safe manner in writing (DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, 2010; Jacobi & Becker, 2013). Participating through writing takes considerably less risk than speaking in front of others (Kavanagh, 2016). Participants only needed to type to share their ideas.

In response to the first question about what we hoped this collaboration would look like, nine out of twelve participants wrote about a desire for solutions and practical applications for our classrooms and our school environment. For instance, Charlie suggested the group could “maybe come up with solutions on how to integrate ideas into the classroom” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019). Mary’s description of the best version of the group aligned with Charlie’s. She described an interest in: “conversation that leads to something concrete; . . . I would love to be pushed to try new ideas in the classroom” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019). Liz also hoped for “practical solutions that we would try out in the classroom individually and then reflect on collectively” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019). It is notable that many of the participants described what they hoped to get out of the group more so than they described the kind of collaboration they hoped this to become. The desire for practicality is common and urgent for

teachers who are required to engage in professional learning communities outside of their classroom responsibilities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). The request is practical, but also safe.

Will This Be Practical and/or Transformational?

A focus on practicality and solutions may be rooted in the neoliberal values steeped throughout contemporary schooling, curriculum, and pedagogy: a focus on production and outcomes (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2004; Rogowska-Stangret, 2017; Rohrer, 2018; Woolley, 2017). According to Brown (2015), neoliberalism is “a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life” (p. 176). These metrics include grades, assessments, standardized tests, student growth objectives (SGOs), professional development plans, and professional learning communities. Regardless of whether or not teachers value neoliberal ideas, they are still influenced by the constant push to measure and produce and gauge effectiveness. As a PLC, this group was fulfilling one of our district’s required metrics. I had hoped that in this space we would be able to disrupt the neoliberal hold on our profession. More than outcomes and new techniques, I hoped for dialogue, shared experiences, critical questioning, reflection, and community. But was their desire for solutions only an extension of neoliberal education? The desire of my fellow group members to hope for solutions and new ideas could also reflect a desire for growth, a willingness to change their practices, a commitment to take action: in other words, critical pedagogy. As Forrest and Rosenberg (1997) explained, “Because feminist pedagogy is built on the concept of examining, challenging, and changing dominant educational practices, social action is viewed as a necessary component of this process” (p. 186). Feminist pedagogy requires action and activism (Manicom, 1992). The participants in our PLC-turned-Freirean culture circle may have wanted practical solutions for

many reasons because they are conditioned in a neoliberal system focused on products and outcomes or, alternatively, because they inherently value action and praxis. As Draco commented, this group should be a place for “not just theory but for practice” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019).

Can We Be Vulnerable?

The other pieces I hoped for—dialogue, reflection, community, and action—were also listed by group members, though I cannot be sure my introductory speech did not influence their responses. Liz noted the need for action to be paired with and followed by collective reflection. Several other participants, Antoinette, Mary, Veronica, Harper, and Draco, focused on the importance of discussion. Draco described an environment where we “discuss difficult issues” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019), and Veronica hoped for “meaningful conversations” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019). Discussion and reflection are two of the components of Souto-Manning’s (2010) critical cycle. In this iterative cycle, based on Freire’s (1970/2004) culture circles, participants’ problem pose, dialogue, problem solve, and take action. Rather than prescriptive, these cycles develop organically. They may not occur in order or in balanced increments. For Freire (1970/2004), reflection, dialogue, and action are critical components dependent on one another:

The insistence that the oppressed engage in reflection on their concrete situation is not a call to armchair revolution. On the contrary, reflection—true reflection—leads to action. On the other hand, when the situation calls for action, that action will constitute an authentic praxis only if its consequences become the object of critical reflection. (p. 66)

One must lead to the other. Dialogue and reflection precede action but action must also be followed by reflection (and more dialogue). The group set expectations that aligned with Freire’s

vision of “authentic praxis.” Grace emphasized the desire to generate real transformation from our dialogue: “I like this idea of this being kind of grassroots that our ideas take root here and then we use them in our classrooms and perhaps then, perhaps, it can spread out and start to create some culture change” (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019). The hope was to change not only our own classrooms and our own praxis, but our wider school community. In our initial discussion of expectations and norms, participants recognized the need for both action *and* meaningful, reflective, and personal discussion.

True dialogue must involve critical thinking (Freire, 1970/2004). Dialogue, Freire insisted, “cannot exist without humility” and “an intense faith in humankind” (p. 90). Humility and faith in humanity, which call for an earnest type of empathy, allow for those in dialogue to be open and vulnerable. The need for vulnerability was the most emphasized in our discussion. In our shared document, Mary stated, “I want to be able to be vulnerable” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019). In our conversation that followed, I asked for what themes and ideas we saw repeated. Freire believed in engaging participants in generating themes as part of critical thinking and critically examining their experiences. Veronica emphasized, “I think trust and vulnerability. Openness” (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019). By describing this desire for vulnerability and openness, Mary and Veronica helped set the expectation that we would challenge each other and be kind to one another as we navigated discussing gender and sexuality, a terrain that was new to most of us. Vulnerability, according to hooks (1994), is key to engaged pedagogy and emancipatory classroom communities. She explained that the teachers and facilitators must be vulnerable to empower themselves and their students: “That empowerment cannot happen if we refuse to be vulnerable while encouraging students to take risks” (p. 21). In order for us to build a feminist, queer community, we needed to be willing to share ourselves (Rohrer, 2018).

The group members emphasized creating a space of dialogue and sharing our personal experiences: actions that require vulnerability, trust, and risk-taking. Antoinette, Veronica, Mary, Grace, and Harper identified key elements of building a trusting community: mutual support, authenticity, vulnerability, sharing, and facing discomfort and challenges together (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009; Shrewsbury, 1993; Schniedewind, 1987; Webb et al., 2002). Kishimoto and Mwangi (2009) argued the necessity of “self-disclosure and vulnerability as a way of imagining a transformative classroom that disrupts and blurs neat boundaries” (p. 98). Several participants described their desire for this collaboration to be a place to share our classroom experiences, especially those that are challenging or confusing. Antoinette described her hope for the culture circle to be a place where “all ideas and suggestions open for discussion, [and] authenticity about personal experiences [is valued]” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019). Echoing the openness and vulnerability described by Antoinette and Mary, Grace imagined the best version of this group as a place where “we share our experiences and support each other with classroom challenges” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019). Harper, too, described, “sharing real struggles” and hoped for a place where we would be able to share ideas, encounters, and observations, “we may feel uncomfortable with but don’t have space [to discuss] otherwise” (Meeting Notes, 7 October 2019). Harper, a first-year teacher, suggested she had already experienced and witnessed language in the classroom and hallways that made her uncomfortable. While she wanted to discuss these experiences, she was looking for a safe place where she could do so without fear. Her request felt particularly important: where are first year teachers safe to express their struggles and discomforts without fear of judgment or consequences? The hierarchical tenure system might influence first-year and non-tenured

teachers to silence their fears and hide their struggles, choosing instead to suffer through it all alone.

Grace and Harper's visions aligned with Kishimoto and Mwangi (2009) who argued that rather than a "safe" environment, feminist pedagogues need to create classrooms that allow and expect discomfort, because "a *transformative classroom* is really in turmoil" (p. 99). To be a transformative space, we would need to be comfortable with discomfort: sharing our fears, insecurities, mistakes, and uncertainties. Kishimoto and Mwangi (2009) wondered, "Do faculty have the power and authority to create a 'safe' environment? Or is it something created through building trust between the faculty and students after going through moments of vulnerability and processes of self-disclosure?" (pp. 88–89). I wondered how much power I had in building this safe environment. I knew I could not create it on my own. But to what extent would I influence the safety? How long would it take for our space to feel like a safe environment? Isn't there a paradox embedded in the whole process: to be vulnerable, we need to feel safe; to feel safe, we need to be vulnerable? The shared experience of co-creating our expectations was a keystone in laying the foundation of our norms and values as a community. By reading through each other's expectations, we found commonalities that were important to us: we wanted to share our experiences and to feel safe being vulnerable, we wanted to be creative, productive, and active, we wanted to be part of transforming our classroom and building culture. It was a start.

Reflections of Queering Feminist Facilitation

I would like to say that all my choices as a facilitator and as a member of this group aligned with feminist pedagogy and democratic practices. I would like to say that I handled our first conflict perfectly. I would like to say our first action as a group was successful. It would be a lie. In facilitating this first discussion, I wanted to decrease my perceived or real power and to

encourage sharing leadership. But attempts to “empower” others can create a fallacious and problematic relationship. Gore (2003) noted,

Even if some teachers attempted to empower other teachers, the distinction remains between those who aim to empower and those who are to be empowered. As a given in any relation which aims at empowerment, the agent becomes problematic when the us/them relationship is conceived as requiring a focus only on “them.” . . . In the focus on Others there is a danger of forgetting to examine one’s own (or one’s group’s) implication in the conditions one seeks to affect. (p. 338)

At this first session, and for several that followed, I did perceive the relationship as a me (facilitator) and them (participants), which caused a tension I had difficulty naming and understanding. I had to, as Gore (2003) advised, examine myself critically. Through journaling after each session and reading and thinking about queer theory and critical feminism, I tried to unravel my perceptions and misconceptions about power and my ability to “empower” my colleagues.

In our first session together, both the participants and I framed the experience in familiar terms: our meeting was like a class where they were the students and I was the teacher. I set up the activity of sharing our expectations and norms. Although it was a way to negotiate and share power, it was also my choice. I gave directions and answered questions. They asked for clarification and permission. Mary and Grace requested “homework”; an analogy I took up by listing some current reading I was doing and suggested we could do some together. When I followed by explaining, “But I also don’t want to burden people with homework,” Rebecca wondered if I would provide “a study guide” and Grace quipped, “Can I get extended time?” (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019). In a way, this playful exchange highlighted our comfort in the

familiar performance of school: the participants as students requesting help and doing homework; the teacher, in this case me, providing resources and assigning homework. Though, another way to interpret the request for homework might adopt Kumashiro's (2002) reflexive reading of "homework": "it requires that we exceed what we know, want, and do, and that we invite uncertainty, instability, and discomfort. . . . This type of homework can help us look beyond the status quo" (p. 153). Mary, Grace, and Rebecca expressed willingness to learn, to do work that might challenge them, and to explore terrain that was unfamiliar. To do that, "homework,"—reading, writing, researching, discussing, and thinking about the new topics at hand—was a critical action in disrupting our comfort with the system as it is.

Ideally, I wanted to disrupt the traditional and comfortable binary roles of facilitator/teacher and participant/student. I hoped that we would not only negotiate our expectations but also the topics of our sessions, as well. When I posed the possibility to the group that we could pair up and lead sessions in partners, I noticed hesitation. I asked:

How would you guys like this to be run? Do you want me to lead every session? Another option would be that we take turns being the discussion leader. We could pair up and take each take a session. Do any of those appeal to you? (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019)

Following this deluge of questions, there was a pregnant pause. Then, Mary requested, "I think something that might be helpful, at first, at least for me, is to, um, have you, sort of model for us what that might look like. I guess I'm hesitant because I'm not totally sure what that means" (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019). Rebecca also felt hesitant about taking a turn leading: "I'm more here to learn a little bit . . . I'm not comfortable teaching-leading something because I don't have the knowledge base to do it. I don't even know where to start" (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019). Rebecca described a binary relationship between student and teacher. She positioned herself as

someone who wants to learn but not lead. As a learner, she felt uncomfortable with the prospect of leading. Rebecca positioned the teacher or leader as someone who holds the knowledge and has confidence in dispensing it. Her description seemed to align with Freire's (1970/2004) description of the traditional schooling's "banking method" of teaching. Freire noted that the participants in his culture circles often positioned the facilitator as the holder of knowledge, and looked to them for answers. This relationship—facilitator/teacher gives knowledge while participant/student receives knowledge—was a place for disruption. But did I work to disrupt this binary relationship in our first meeting?

In the murky space of being both a facilitator and a participant, I tried to attend to the participants' feelings more so than disrupting our comfortable positions. Once Mary and Rebecca voiced their hesitation, I tabled the discussion of how to lead our sessions. First, I did try to describe how it might look:

I don't want it to be like a class where we—people present research. . . . each of us taking on a session would be more: "this is an issue I'd really want to talk about with this group, that I've been thinking, something I saw, a scenario." (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019)

I attempted to reframe the concept of leading a session by distancing it from the idea of presenting and aligning it with a description of a discussion leader or facilitator. I emphasized the role of topics we were interested in and in observations we were making in our classrooms. In a way, I gently pressed against the banking method. Leading did not have to mean explaining or telling or presenting. In facilitating the close of this session, I said:

So, for next week, what potential topics would we cover as a theme of one day's discussion? And maybe thinking about—just observe yourself for the next week or two weeks. Like where is it coming up? How do you see gender going on in your classroom,

anything you want to talk about. Oh, and, so here's an article from *Rethinking Schools: Gender and Sexuality* called "The New Misogyny" (Butler-Wall et al., 2016), and it's about how our whole profession is misogynistic! . . . That's your homework. . . . For next time, potential topics that we might cover. (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019)

Once again, I took up the analogy of "homework." (Is it an analogy if you do actually assign reading and a task?) With intentions of collaborating the topics we would address as a PLC, I asked the participants to 1) consider potential topics; 2) observe themselves and their classrooms for anything related to gender; and 3) read an article about misogyny in the system of education. In my reflection for this session. I noted some wins: "There was laughter. Yay!" (Researcher's Journal, 7 October 2019). But I also noted mistakes. One in particular weighed on me:

I also feel that I messed up one kind of central task of a first meeting of anything. I did not give us time /request each person introduce themselves. Since five members of the group are new to our school this was a pretty major oversight on my part. We had representatives from three different departments present, and I definitely shouldn't have assumed that the new teachers knew everyone's names. How can we be comfortable in a dialogue with one another if we don't know each other's names!?! (Researcher's Journal, 7 October 2019)

Maybe this was a minor mistake but I recognized the potential consequence on my goal of creating a comfortable space for authentic dialogue. For the new teachers to our school, not knowing the names of colleagues from different departments might be a deterrent for them to participate in the dialogue and to address other group members freely. From my own experience, I know that concern and anxiety about names can distract from focusing on the conversation happening in the moment.

Considering my choices and actions as a facilitator, my attention to feminist processes seemed evident: it was collaborative, participants had several opportunities to voice their ideas both in speaking and in writing, I was more directive. But what constitutes a queering of my facilitation? In this first session, I see little evidence of disrupting norms or binaries such as teacher/student or facilitator/participant or empowerer/empowered. Only in committing to the discussion of gender and sexuality did we dip our toes into the waters of queering. How was I going to disrupt the banking method still apparent in our interactions? Freire (1970/2004) reminded me to use problem-posing and dialogue drawn from the participants' own experiences. Freire explained, "Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge" (p. 81). The "homework" I assigned, I hoped, might help us problem-pose more directly from our experiences. Critical feminists reminded me to challenge my perceptions of empowerment (Ellsworth, 1992; Gore, 2003). Queer theorists reminded me to rebel against the status quo, including myself, to question and disrupt binaries, and to embrace the notion of failure (Britzman, 1998; Coll & Charlton, 2018; Edelman, 2004; Glasby, 2019; Halberstam, 2011; Shlasko, 2005; Waite, 2019).

Critical Incident 1: The Crucible

Homework aside, problems posed themselves. Our newly forming community faced a challenge almost immediately when we addressed a school controversy in our second meeting. Joan, a new member (who had not been present at the first meeting) left a school newspaper article on my desk with a sticky note with the question: *Can we talk about this in the PLC?* The article, written by three students who identified as male, expressed troubling views of athletic trainer Britney Taylor's accusations of sexual assault against professional football player

Antonio Brown (MHS Newspaper, October 2019). They titled the article: “Antonio Brown: Racist Clown or Innocent Phenom?” In it, they posed, “The first question at hand is why Taylor waited two years before bringing this alleged crime to the police,” which they refer to as “suspicious circumstances” before suggesting Taylor is guilty of a “money-grabbing scheme.” They asked, “Why would Taylor even continue seeing Brown if he had already exposed himself to her numerous times during training sessions?” (Brown Article, October 2019). As I read through the article, I felt enraged and dumbfounded. The second author had been a student of mine the previous year in an advanced placement class where we analyzed gender and sexuality through a feminist lens. How could he have written and believed any of this? I wondered if student 2 really felt this way and had somehow hid his perspectives during our unit. I felt hurt by this potential reality. Like Joan, I wanted to discuss the article at length with the PLC. I also wanted to talk to my former student, my current student who I knew was a co-editor of the school newspaper, and the advisor of the newspaper. I wanted to act immediately.

Responding on My Own

I felt similar to the teacher activists Picower (2012) interviewed who: “felt a passionate need to take action” and “to interrupt the oppressive nature of education” (p. 569). In my eagerness to take action, I took several steps despite Joan’s request that we discuss the article as a group. I was mobilized and felt an urgency to respond. First, I emailed Joan: “We absolutely need to talk about this article” (17 October 2019); then, I sent an email to the advisor of our school newspaper with a bullet point list of my concerns. Next, I emailed student 2, my former student. Following my next period class, I also talked to one of my students, a co-editor of the newspaper. Four actions within an hour. Twice Joan requested in emails that we approach this carefully and collaboratively. She wrote, “I think we should talk in the PLC before we approach

the writers. Ok with you?” (Email correspondence, 17 October 2019). I had already breached this expectation. In reflection, I can see how my eagerness to act overshadowed my commitment to work collaboratively with the PLC. Joan, in contrast, wanted to act but prioritized the group’s discussion and consensus.

As the person who had initiated our budding community and as a person trying to queer my feminist pedagogy, I felt as if I faltered in our first opportunity for collective action. Up to this point, my rebellion and activism as a teacher (mostly) had been confined to my own classroom. I was practiced and conditioned to act as a rogue agent rather than as a teammate. Teaching can be an isolating profession that makes collaboration tricky and even burdensome (Sutton & Shouse, 2016). In the neoliberal, patriarchal structure of education, teachers are characterized as lone wolves who operate largely by themselves and in the silos of their classrooms and content areas. It is much easier to close the classroom door than it is to bring teachers from different content areas together to problem-pose and problem-solve. Acting as an individual does not require the same kind of patience, forethought, restraint, or communication required when acting as a community member. In this instance, this lesson was mine rather than the group’s. Merely setting expectations does not ensure a group will follow and value those norms. Building a collaborative group and a team’s norms happen over time. Committing to this kind of collaborative community such as this, means deliberately changing our habits, behaviors, and actions. But as is true of many other teacher activists, I sought community to change the system beyond my own classroom (Picower, 2012). Working with Joan and our new PLC meant challenging my previous methods of teacher activism and my comfort in acting alone. This disruption helped me to reevaluate and shift my habits, behaviors, and actions.

My colleague, Joan, approached this event with a deep conviction that dialoguing with a group of colleagues before taking action would be a more effective approach than acting alone. While Joan was not present for the setting of our group expectations, her natural inclinations aligned to those we had set. Her response to reading the article was to seek community. While Joan also wanted to take action, she wanted to do so after careful deliberation. In part, this may have had to do with confidence and experience as much as it did with a commitment to community. I had experience with taking action, but Joan was fairly new to it. Since the article was a school-wide publication rather than an essay written for one of our individual classes, the responsibility of who should respond to it was ambiguous (a problem that would prove messy later). Joan emphasized her expectations and concerns in our second session:

I think it's really, really important how we handle it. And I think it's important that we reach a group decision. It's really delicate. A really delicate undertaking. And that's also the reason I brought this article to the group rather than talking to the students myself or talking to [the advisor] or [the student editor] myself. So, that's just—important to me that we talk about that. (Meeting 2, 21 October 2019)

Joan made her expectations and priorities clear in this statement: 1) it should be a group discussion and decision; and 2) we should be careful and intentional about what actions we decided to take. Maybe most importantly, she subtly and “delicately” (to use her word) implied that my preemptive actions were problematic. Why had I not followed our norms? Why was I so quick to action when Joan was patient? I felt embarrassed and ashamed. Being part of a community requires individuals to be patient and communicative rather than reactive. But I had jumped to action rather than be deliberate and “delicate.” Worse than that, I had disregarded Joan's request, a colleague that I trust and care about and consider a friend. In building a feminist

community and queering my practice, I had to disrupt my usual course of action and my usual thinking: that meant feeling discomfort. “‘Discomfort’ is a productively ambiguous term for a range of emotions and affects: embarrassment, fear, apprehension, nervousness, and vexation all come under the rubric of discomfort” (Murray & Kalayji, 2018, p. 19). Rather than avoid these emotions, I needed to sit with them, to grapple with them, to reflect on them.

The Group Problem-Posing through Dialogue

My individual actions proved problematic as the group began to dialogue about the offensive article and our potential collective actions. Joan judiciously expressed her concerns in our meeting. Her focus was on justice and equity in how we approached responding to this situation. Twice in the session, she asked me, “So, you talked to one of the writers already, though?” (Meeting Notes, 21 October 2019). The problem with my speaking to student 2 before our PLC meeting, in Joan’s estimation, was the unfair advantage it gave him over the other two students. She explained, “For the sake of justice, . . . It seems unfair to me that the one kid has had a chance to defend his name” (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019). Rather than speak to them individually, she proposed speaking to them as a group. I wondered about justice here. And equity versus equality. In speaking with my former student, I was able to express concern and care from a personal relationship developed over a year of building trust and communication. He had asked me to write his college recommendation letter and to help him revise his application essays. In speaking to him one-on-one, I was able to draw on a foundation of trust.

The thirteen members of our group present for this discussion held a variety of perspectives on what to focus on and how to respond. Rebecca and Veronica both emphasized the position that the students were children who did not know better. While angered by the piece, they ultimately viewed the students through an empathetic lens. Veronica explained, “they are

just that: they're kids. And they might—not that it's innocence—just lack understanding about rape culture” (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019). Rebecca agreed, “And I think that that's—and I'm not letting him off the hook, by any means—I was just like, ‘he doesn't know.’ That was my first initial response. Doesn't have the information” (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019). I pushed against this view by comparing these students who identify as male as being ignorant by reminding them: “There's plenty of [girls] in this school that know, though” (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019). I also added that they were seniors, presumably heading off to college soon, who have gone through four years of our curriculum (e.g. argumentation and close reading in English classes).

Veronica, Joan, Mary, and Grace discussed the many ways this article could be viewed as a teachable moment. Grace focused on the recent Kavanaugh hearings and the potential for such an article to follow the students into their future careers. Veronica considered the broader school community. She stated, “This is so much broader of a teaching moment. There's probably plenty of students in our school who feel just the same out of ignorance, and we need to teach them otherwise. But how?” (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019). The question of “How?” was the central problem of our discussion, and a difficult one on which to find consensus. Joan liked the idea of having students write a letter where they explored the counterargument. Mary, Joan, and I discussed ways to open a dialogue with the students to better understand their thinking, their goals, and their prior knowledge. Mary referred to her “camp counselor side” to imagine asking the students: “What happened? What were you trying to do?” This approach seemed tenable to me (and my own camp counselor experience—where I first experienced enacting critical, democratic, and feminist leadership). Mary's suggestion sounded similar to the approach of restorative justice, which employs democratic practices like talking circles to disrupt traditionally

punitive forms of authoritarian discipline (Sandwick, Hahn, & Ayoub, 2019). Joan, Mary, and I agreed that it could be possible to hold a dialogue with the three student authors without being disciplinarian or accusatory. Joan felt reassured, “I mean, just given how we’ve been talking about it—I don’t have any doubt that it will come across to them that we don’t think that they’re terrible” (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019). With Mary’s approach of exploring their motivation and thinking with the students in mind, we discussed how we might approach this conversation.

In careful dissent, Sara challenged all of us by questioning whether or not it was our place to have a conversation with the students. She interjected, “I feel a little uncomfortable about this because I feel like it’s like we’re attacking them and it’s chastising them, . . . and I don’t know if that’s our position to do that” (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019). Sara emphasized that the editors and the advisor held the more appropriate roles and responsibility in addressing concerns with the article. In doing so, Sara brought up issues of authority and power. If we “chastised” the students, then we would be positioning ourselves as the disciplinarians and the students as subordinates in need of correction: which would not be aligned with critical, feminist, or queer pedagogy. We grappled with this dilemma. Was there a way to approach a dialogue with the students that was feminist and not disciplinarian in nature? Was there a way to invite them to a discussion without “pulling rank” as their teachers? Sara wondering whether or not it was our position to address the students at all reminded us that we teach in a hierarchical structure with channels of authority (sometimes referred to as “chains of command”). In this paternalistic system, the advisor of the newspaper was the appropriate person to talk with the student authors. However, we dismissed the leaving the conversation to the advisor of the paper was dismissed in the following exchange:

Joan: I don’t trust the advisor.

Sara: This should be coming from the advisor.

Joan: I also, I don't—

Kelly: It's not going to.

Sara: I know! That's a bigger problem.

Joan: I think it would be a lot for the editor to handle. (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019)

Joan and I were both motivated by distrust for the advisor and an assumption that she would not address the issue or our concerns in ways we viewed as appropriate and meaningful. There is a matrix of power we were attempting to navigate—or possibly to circumnavigate. Whose responsibility is it to act when the person in a position of power chooses not to? In a sense, we were looking to use our power as teachers and as members of this newly formed group. In addition to believing the advisor would not act, Joan took note that the weight of this should not fall on the editors, themselves only students. In this way, we talked ourselves into the necessity of taking action. In our dialogue, we attempted to think critically through options, misgivings, and best approaches. Joan, who was concerned with being delicate and intentional in our approach, considered the student authors' fears. She empathized with them and considered what may have motivated the position taken in the article. As students who identify as male, they potentially feared the scenario Antonio Brown found himself in: accused of sexual assault in a public way, in a way that damaged his career and further opportunities. (This fear is, of course, not founded in the reality of sexual assault convictions in the United States. See RAINN.org). Joan asked, "How do you think we can say that? Like, 'I understand that it must be frustrating to feel . . . this fear that you could be accused of something'" (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019). First, Joan posed a question, thinking out loud, which she followed with her own hypothetical response. Meeting to discuss the article gave us a space to plan and practice the kinds of

questions and statements we might say to the students. This was helpful in working through wording and the tone we hoped to establish.

A few scenarios were discussed, including a meeting with the advisors, student authors, and editors, or a request for the newspaper—and potentially the student authors themselves—to write and run a counter in the next issue of the paper. Eventually, we concluded that Joan and I would approach the three authors as their English teachers. This role offered us a narrative link to the traditional schooling power structure, in that we had a “right” to speak to the students because the product (writing) fell under our content area specialty. As their current and former English teachers, we were also drawing on the personal relationships we had built with the students. This was a more comforting view as it seemingly aligned with the value placed on relationships in feminist pedagogy (hooks, 1994). We were positioning ourselves as mentors: concerned about their futures and empathetic to their fears. Still, we wanted to avoid, as Mary put it, being the “moral arbiters” (Transcript 2, 21 October 2019). Though taking the stance of concerned mentors did not disrupt the “moral arbiter” role, we did voice consistent commitment to not presenting ourselves as disciplinarians who were mad at them or seeking to punish them. Maybe naively, Joan and I seemed to believe that our intentions and careful planning would be enough to ensure an open dialogue with the students. Of course, we were forgetting that the teacher always holds authority over students. The failure to address and disrupt this relationship in meaningful ways was criticized by Ellsworth (1992): “Theorists of critical pedagogy have failed to launch any meaningful analysis of or program for reformulating the institutionalized power imbalances between themselves and their students” (p. 98). Ellsworth (1992) continued, “Strategies such as student empowerment and dialogue give the illusion of equality while in fact leaving the authoritarian nature of the teacher/student relationship intact” (p. 98). What unfolded

was not the moment of restorative justice and open community we imagined, but a tense, confusing series of miscommunications that plunged us further into the web of power and hierarchy and further away from dialogue and “beloved community” (hooks, 1994). Like Ellsworth’s experience: enacting critical pedagogy and attempting to share power with students was messy and problematic. As Gore (2003) put it: “no matter what our aims or how we go about ‘empowering,’ our efforts will be partial and inconsistent” (p. 340).

My Recollections: A Dialogue Planned, A Dialogue Missed

Maybe that subtitle is misleading: we did have an abbreviated dialogue of sorts with the three student authors, albeit it was not the one we planned, nor the one for which we hoped. Joan and I began by co-writing an email to the three student authors that we hoped was non-threatening and concise:

[Students 1, 2, and 3]:

We recently read your article about Antonio Brown in *The Miller*. As your current and former English teachers, we would like to discuss the article with you and get a better sense of your perspective. We are available Tuesday, Oct 29th during lunch and Wednesday, Oct 30th after school - please let us know if either date works for you. We look forward to talking with you all.

Best,

The students emailed back and forth with us a couple of times to set a time and date. On the day of our lunch meeting, student 2 met us at Joan’s classroom at the designated time. He was alone and unsure where the other students were. He looked nervous. When the other two students arrived, student 3 sat down at the square table where Joan, student 2, and I were already seated. Student 1 remained standing near Joan. Student 1 claimed they had been called down to the vice

principal's office to talk about this and that the vice principal told them the students should not speak with us. Joan looked caught off guard; she began with a reassurance that her relationship with them was important. She explained that this meeting was not about judging them or thinking that they are bad people. She emphasized that we wanted to get an understanding of their thinking. Then, Joan asked how they were feeling. Joan displayed and prioritized care and concern for the students. Student 1 said, "it would be different if it were coming from another student rather than a teacher who grades them and has power over them" (Researcher's Journal, 31 October 2019). Joan assured him that she cared about him and their relationship.

I added that the students were under no obligation to speak with us and that we were just "looking for a dialogue" (Researcher's Journal, 31 October 2019). Students 1 and 3 said they did feel obligated and that it was unclear that they had a choice in the meeting. Student 1 accused Joan of "using her authority" (Researcher's Journal, 31 October 2019) and repeated that it was wrong of us to speak with them since it was not about class or one of our own assignments. We again tried to clarify what we thought was important: they were not in trouble, they were not obligated to speak with us, and that we were only hoping for a dialogue. During the brief interaction, I had been very aware of my heart pounding and my hands shaking. The dynamic shift and struggle of power was palpable. I concentrated on keeping my face composed and even trying to have a soft smile rather than a scowl or even a look of stoicism. I concentrated on my breathing. I tried to keep my voice measured and not accusatory.

Reflecting Queer Disruption and Paradoxes of Power Analysis

The encounter with the student authors was complex and emotional—interwoven with many layers and threads of overlapping power. Here are some of the layers of the power matrix as I discerned them: a) our positions as teachers and theirs as students; b) Joan was the current

teacher of students 1 and 3; I was the former teacher of student 2; I was writing a college recommendation for student 2; c) they were three male students; we were two female teachers; d) we were two white teachers, they were three students of South Asian descent; e) Students 1 and 3 called on the cis/het male vice principal, leaving Student 2 out; f) Student 1 remained standing, while the rest of us sat at a table; g) Joan and I called for the meeting via an email that did not leave an explicit option for not attending; and h) the students chose not to engage in the dialogue about the article, but directed the dialogue to questions of appropriate use of our teaching authority.

In the moment, the most striking enactment of power from my vantage point was Student 1's choice to remain standing. He positioned himself near and over his (female) teacher. His bodily positioning felt intentionally intimidating. His proximity to Joan forced her to look up at him while he looked down on her. He had interpreted our meeting as teachers abusing their power, so in response he went to a position ranked higher than ours: the (male) vice principal. He used the proxy authority of the vice principal to gain leverage and power in the meeting. With the vice principal's support and his physical stature, he positioned himself as the disciplinarian, admonishing us for taking, what he deemed, "inappropriate" action.

When focused on Student 2, however, a very different story of power emerged. Student 2 had been abandoned by the other two students, probably because of his previous discussion with me (where he insisted that he had merely revised Student 1's work and had no idea he was to be listed as a co-author). For several minutes, he sat quietly with two English teachers waiting for the other two authors to arrive: how terrible that must have been! I noted in my journal how nervous he appeared. Then, there was the matter of his college recommendation letter. I had submitted my recommendation for him the previous day, which I did intentionally to signal that

the meeting had no bearing on my recommendation. However, leading up to the meeting, the email interactions deciding on dates, my recommendation had not yet been submitted. I can only speculate as to his fears regarding his recommendation but he likely experienced fear, confusion, and anxiety not knowing if his recommendation was in jeopardy and not knowing what impact his involvement in writing/revising the article or in attending the meeting might have on the quality of the recommendation I was to give. Later, on the same day of this interaction, Student 2 sought me out. He apologized for how the meeting went. I, in turn, apologized to him and assured him that I cared about him. He thanked me for submitting the recommendation. A few months later, he emailed with the update that he had been accepted at his top choice school, a prestigious university.

I empathized with the students. Seeing and experiencing the tension of our interaction signaled to me that our goal to have an open dialogue was inherently flawed and, while well-intentioned, misguided. Our school community does not practice restorative justice. The students are habituated to patriarchal, authoritarian, and punitive systems. Having to talk to a teacher implied punishment. For the conversation to proceed as Joan and I intended, as an open dialogue, it would be critical to have previously established relationships with all three students built on trust, mutual respect, and care. It would be advisable to clearly and explicitly state our intentions for the dialogue and to reassure them that it was not disciplinarian in nature. Even then, the meeting would have always been enmeshed in power dynamics. As Student 1 suggested, only a conversation with peers rather than teachers would have altered this dynamic completely. While our intentions were feminist and critical, our actions as received by the students were authoritarian: an attempt to use our power and position as teachers to chastise their views. hooks (1989) asked, “How do we as feminist teachers use power in a way that is not coercive,

dominating?” (p. 52). In planning with the PLC for this dialogue, Joan and I attempted to view our “use of power” in this way: as something not coercive or dominating. In this interaction, Joan and I struggled with which values to prioritize: care, justice, and authority coming into conflict (Noddings, 2012). Justice, from our point of view, included offering the students a chance to discuss their motivations and intentions for publishing the newspaper article. We saw justice as engaging in an uncomfortable but important conversation about why sexual assaults often go unreported and why not reporting is not evidence that a sexual assault did not occur. Joan chose care. She attended to the students’ emotions, expressed empathy, emphasized the importance of their relationship, and assured them of her good opinion of them (Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 1999). But prioritizing care meant not having a difficult conversation about victim blaming and why survivors of assault often do not report their experiences. By ending the meeting without engaging in a critical dialogue, Joan and I made the choice I perceived as feminist and based in the ethics of care: we chose to prioritize the students’ emotional needs and our relationships with them over our desire to critically examine and discuss their assumptions about sexual assault allegations (Gilligan, 1982, 2011; Robinson, 2011). What happens when a feminist in a position of authority thinks and believes she is using her power to enrich but the resulting effect really diminishes her students? By not forcing the students into the dialogue, we thought we were showing respect for their autonomy. The discussion was a choice, not a mandate. Only over time could we also prove that we had no intention of taking retribution through harsh grading.

Power, according to Foucault (1980), is not a product to be held or given but rather as something exercised and enacted: “Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there. . . . In other words, individuals are the vehicles of power, not its points of application” (in

Gore, 2003, p. 335). The principal and vice principal (both of whom identify as cis/het, white men), reinforced the students' view that we were acting inappropriately. In our attempts at conversations with them, we were silenced and admonished. We were told that we should have only talked to the advisor—"the adult in charge" (Researcher's Journal, 6 November 2019) and that our approach was not the right or proper way. I was told that I "can come off a bit strong" (Researcher's Journal, 31 October 2019). Repeatedly, it was suggested that the students rightfully feared that we might take retribution against them through grading. My journal that afternoon focused on power, authority, and the paradox of enacting feminist practices inside a patriarchal system:

How do you take a feminist approach inside a patriarchal building (and system)?

Our attempt to approach this topic as a community in dialogue felt interrupted by talk of authority and power and abuse of that power and retribution. Rather than be seen as concerned people who care about you, the student felt afraid and defensive. His response was to go to our superior (a man). His enactment of his power was to stand during the meeting while the rest of us sat around a common table. His response was to say, essentially, "you shouldn't be doing this. This isn't the way."

Our attempt to discuss with our two male administrators also did not result in open dialogue where everyone had the opportunity to voice their concerns. Instead, we were silenced and made to feel like we were in the wrong. We were told to follow the "right way" and the proper procedure, the proper channels. The suggestion that we should have only gone to the advisor of the paper feels like another patriarchal move. We must defer to the head of the newspaper to deal with it.

There seemed to be a paradox embedded into the power conversations today: at once, Joan and I were presented as having too much authority over the students (because we grade them) and at the same time having no authority over the students (because this isn't our terrain). (Researcher's Journal, 31 October 2019)

Attempting to dialogue and problem pose in the patriarchal school structure was challenging and disheartening. The admonishment from our administrators that we had not approached the student interaction appropriately made me both defensive but also reflective. Ahmed (2012) explained:

To work as a feminist often means trying to transform the organizations that employ us. This rather obvious fact has some telling consequences. I have learned about how power works by the difficulties I have experienced in trying to challenge power. (pp. 89–90)

Like Ahmed (2012), we faced difficulty and resistance—not just in the resistance to change but even more basic at the resistance to dialogue. Weiler (1991) also discussed the difficulty of engaging in feminist pedagogy within patriarchal institutions: “Feminist pedagogy within academic classrooms addresses heterogeneous groups of students within a competitive and individualistic culture in which the teacher holds institutional power and responsibility (even if she may want to reject that power)” (p. 460). Whether or not we wanted it, Joan and I held power in a way the students did not. We could not shed or reject that power. The threat of grade retribution was real to them, even if it was absurd to us. The grading system is undeniably a system of power that perpetuates the individualistic, competitive, and hierarchical culture of school.

It was challenging to continue to engage in a community response after the meeting. Since we did not have another group meeting in those two weeks, most of the other members

were involved on the periphery by offering us guidance, support, and advice. One member, Michelle, engaged in her own action by penning a response piece that she submitted to the school newspaper. Michelle included me in offering revisions and suggestions. Her response article was printed in the next issue of the school newspaper. Incidentally, the administration used Michelle's article as an example of an "appropriate" response.

Co-conspirators: Out of a Crucible, Some Gem

Joan and I became co-conspirators in the two weeks between the group's meeting about the article and our next meeting. On our shared prep periods, we debriefed, discussed, commiserated, planned, and co-wrote emails to administration and the supervisor of the newspaper. While my researcher journal is filled with frustration and tension toward the administration, the only notable comfort described is collaborating with Joan:

Sometimes we [met] as Joan worked through her prep periods to create the costumes for the upcoming school play. And with the marking period ending and both of us having piles of grading to do. Teachers juggle and juggle and juggle.

Is it no wonder why more teachers do not press back on their administrations or on the system? It's exhausting and it feels impossible and it competes with all the other duties and responsibilities that come with teaching. (Researcher's Journal, 7 November 2019)

The interaction with the three students and the follow-up interactions with the administrators and the head of the newspaper were emotionally draining, disconcerting, frustrating, and (seemingly) unproductive. It felt like we did not achieve anything. It felt like we lost more than just our prep periods. What had we achieved by talking to the students? What had we achieved by talking to our administrators? What had we achieved by talking to the head of the newspaper? The tangible achievement for me was forming a trusting, supportive, and communicative relationship with my

colleague. The collaboration helped us to share the tension, frustration, uncertainty, and fears with another person. Pushing against the system felt impossible and exhausting, but with another person to lean on, it felt a little less impossible and a little bit less exhausting. Crucible moments that test resolve also form bonds.

Cycle 2: A Community of Sharing, Reflecting, and Questioning

Following the burst of action related to our first two sessions, our cultural circle entered a new critical phase focused more on sharing our experiences than taking direct actions. In these sessions, we engaged in problem posing, dialoguing, and problem solving (Freire, 1970/2004, Souto-Manning, 2010). Over sessions three, four, and five, group members took turns sharing experiences from their classrooms that were related to gender and sexuality. The initial stories offered opportunities for us to begin reflecting collectively on our practices and sparked many participants to ask critical questions. How do we appropriately address and discuss sexual assault in classroom discussion? How do we respond to an individual student triggered by texts and course content? How do we respond to students who mock and deride sexual assault and homophobia? By sharing moments of uncertainty, participants took risks and engaged in acts of vulnerability. As others responded to the stories being shared, their support, encouragement, and compassion fostered trust, and—in time—built our community.

Stories that Problem Pose

Problem posing is the process of naming, describing, and discussing the issues relevant to a group of people in a particular place, time, and context (Freire, 1970/2004; Kincheloe; 2005; Souto-Manning, 2010). In the critical process of education imagined by Freire (1970/2004) the problem posing stage precedes problem solving and action, though all of the stages should be viewed as iterative rather than linear (Souto-Manning, 2010). For our circle, this cycle involved

participants engaging in storytelling and dialoguing about a variety of problems they experienced in their classrooms: Liz shared a story about a student triggered by sexual assault in a class text. Mary shared her observations about the gender imbalances in students participating in her classes. The next two stories shared more vulnerable problems of practice. Rebecca discussed a particularly toxic class and student that was causing her ongoing anxiety. Grace shared her response to seniors choosing homophobic and misogynistic as anonymous handles in an online educational game. Problem posing engaged our circle in moments of vulnerability and solidarity as we listened to each other's stories (hooks, 1994; Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009; Murray & Kalayji, 2018).

Liz's story: "Can You Tell I've Fretted about This?" (Liz, Transcript 3, 4 November 2019)

The critical incident of the Antonio Brown sexual assault article sparked several members of the group to reflect on the way they approached discussions of sexual assault in their classrooms. In particular, Liz and Sara, both ninth grade English teachers, contemplated and questioned their practices of how to approach scenes that depict or allude to sexual assault in two ninth grade texts: *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) and *The Assistant* (Malamud, 1957). At the opening of session 3, Liz shared an experience she had the previous week: a student experienced triggers to the discussion of the rape trial of Tom Robinson in Lee's (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The student took initiative to speak to Liz about her discomfort and anxiety reading and discussing the text in class.

Liz described several ways she responded to the student: a) she went to her supervisor for advice; b) she had a one-on-one meeting with the student where she asked, "what would make [you] feel comfortable?" (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019); c) together they made a plan involving a friend of the student (also in the class) who would forewarn what was coming in the

text; d) she made sure the student's parents were aware; e) she asked whether or not the student needed any resources (e.g. therapy, guidance, etc.); f) she asked the culture circle for further feedback and advice. Liz admitted that she felt "unsettled" (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019) by the interaction; she posed several critically reflective questions to the group:

Should I have warned students or pursued this for the class as a whole? Are there other alternative solutions that I could have worked out in terms of the reading to make sure that she was comfortable? . . . How do I trust that she's okay? (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019)

Liz's questions revealed how her critical incident continued to weigh on her. She quipped, "Can you tell I've fretted about this?" (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019). Her response and her reflexivity displayed empathy and care for both the individual student and for the class as a whole but also an insecurity about having done what was right or having done enough. Liz's story and follow-up questions posed a problem for the group to consider: how do we approach triggering discussions that could recreate trauma for students in the room? Rohrer (2018) used the phrase "it's in the room" (p. 576) to describe her feminist pedagogical framework, which begins with this recognition:

Students over the years have taught me the power of recognizing that whatever the social justice topic is that we are studying (gender oppression, ableism, racism, colonialism, heterosexism, classism, etc.) it is almost always in the room in some form or another. (p. 577)

The discussion that followed Liz's story and questions revealed that most of us were not beginning with the assumption that sexual assault was "in the room." Briefly following Liz's story, the conversation jumped to participants wondering about alternative texts—a potential

solution that attempts to avoid rather than address difficult conversations about sexual assault. I interjected on this hypothetical path by saying, “I’m inclined to not ditch texts and to change the way we approach them,” and then redirecting the group by posing the question: “I think that’s what we can talk about here: how do we approach this?” (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019). In this moment, I acted as facilitator, redirecting the conversation back to praxis. I also took a moment to acknowledge Liz’s efforts. I exclaimed, “I mean, you did a lot of stuff—What else could you have done? You did a lot!” (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019). I wanted to extend the conversation and to delve into further possibilities, but first to reassure Liz and honor the steps she had taken. This encouragement rippled into a chorus of praise supporting Liz.

Connecting to Liz’s experience, Mary encouraged the group to consider the implications of conversations like Liz’s that reach beyond the classroom, spilling—as she put it—into, “the lunchroom and the hallway” (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019). She posed:

I’ve had similar experiences with students with particular content. I guess . . . the place that I am thinking about is in how we have conversations about sensitive issues in class, and then, how that gets mad-libbed out in their conversations in the hallways. . . . I’m thinking about, “Well, how do I help those other seventy kids that I have?” (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019)

Addressing the needs of a particular student like Liz’s was only part of the equation we needed to consider. Mary reminded us to plan for all students, even those who may not be triggered or re-traumatized by a discussion of sexual assault, but who are influenced by these discussions and who continue to have them beyond the classroom. For instance, the three students who authored the Antonio Brown article were seniors who had been part of discussions in their previous English classrooms about Mayella Ewell from *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and Helen Bober

from *The Assistant* (1957): what had they taken away from those discussions? What did they learn about consent and false accusations and trauma from sexual assault?

Liz's story and Mary's idea of how these conversations begin in class and continue beyond our (perceived) control propelled Sara to question her current practices. She asked, "Should I be doing more? . . . Rather than just approaching [a single student] about it, should it be a class discussion before we even get to it?" (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019). In the space of this session, Liz's story and Mary's questions encouraged Sara to critically reflect on her current praxis and how to transform her future praxis. Likewise, other members of the group began to reconsider best practices when addressing sexual assault and the pros and cons of trigger warnings.

Problem Solving: Trigger Warnings. The critical questioning continued. Sara's question about how to ready a class for a difficult conversation led Liz to further reflect on how she will approach *The Assistant* differently:

It didn't occur to me to give a trigger warning to the class. But now, I'll probably think about that differently. You know, that's another thing that's troubling to me is that [the student] said something. What if there are students who have just suffered through and didn't say anything? (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019)

As a group, we did not come to a decision about whether or not trigger warnings are the proper method to preemptively address difficult conversations. But our dialogue did prompt us to consider them as a pedagogical move to build a safer classroom discussion around sexual assault. While the debate continues, several feminist pedagogues view the use of trigger warnings as aligning with feminist pedagogy in the concern for students' well-being, the offer for students to have a choice in engaging with the material, and a commitment to social justice (Ahmed, 2015;

Clemens, 2016; Lothian, 2016; Rohrer, 2018). Lothian (2016) asked, “What if the praxis of warning, broadly conceived, can be a method not to avoid such spaces and experiences, but to facilitate them?” (p. 745). Clemens (2016) viewed trigger warnings, “as an act of nurturing” (para. 5), while Ahmed (2015) described them, “as a partial and necessarily inadequate measure to enable some people to stay in the room so that ‘difficult issues’ can be discussed” (para. 34). In our discussion, Grace’s view of trigger warnings aligned with Ahmed’s. She noted the value of trigger warnings to give students opportunity to decide for themselves: “I think if you give people enough advanced warning, then they can make that choice for themselves” (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019). Our discussion of trigger warnings offered an opportunity for many group members to reflect on what they have done in the past and how they may approach future lessons differently. Our discussion was only a start to the conversation. What else could we have done to plan and take action more deliberately across future sessions? This exchange captured the kind of ripple that has the potential to spread beyond our circle as group members continue to reflect and to pose similar debates to other colleagues.

Reflections on Queering Feminist Facilitation

The questions we posed could not be fully answered in a 36-minute session. Should I have had us break out into small groups to plan and practice responses? I struggled with the choice of letting the conversation evolve in a natural, organic, and unrestricted way or instead refocusing the group’s attention or providing more structure and direction. How—and when—would we get to the action portion of the critical cycle? In my reflections from these sessions, I confessed:

I worry about how much I should plan ahead. . . . I haven’t let go of leading the circle. I feel responsible for planning and making sure it runs smoothly. . . . I posted an

“assignment” [on our Google Classroom page] for our next meeting. Is this the right thing to do? Or does it feel too structured and less organic? Is it just a means of communicating with everyone or does it formalize our process? (Researcher’s Journal, 7 November 2019)

In the above, I questioned and grappled with my choices about feminist leadership. My concern in decentering myself as the facilitator often took precedence over my desire to plan—a habit from years of teaching. Planning ahead felt like taking power and choice away from the group members. Not planning ahead felt like missed opportunities to dive deeper. I repeatedly struggled with this paradox over our sessions. However, taking a feminist—or queerly feminist—approach to facilitation does not mean forgoing planning altogether. Rather, it may mean the planning happens as a group. This may be the real missed opportunity. After our first round of negotiating expectations, I could have taken time to revisit negotiating. As Mary noted in our first session:

I think it would be helpful to and related to this idea of setting objectives or coming up with something concrete is to have sort of like topics or benchmarks of things that we want to talk about like, ‘this is the meeting where this is the topic,’ I think would be helpful for me to sort of feel like there’s some kind of structure to it. (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019)

In the first session, Mary and many of the other participants expressed hesitance in their ability to come up with the topics. But after a few meetings, I could have had us revisit the idea of generating themes together for future sessions. We could have gathered the questions we had about gender and sexuality in our practices and discussions and curricula, and then worked to find patterns together. In Souto-Manning’s (2010) critical cycle, the facilitator generates themes

after a period of observing the participating teachers. From a queerly feminist lens, the generation of themes could be done together. Continuing to negotiate the curriculum beyond the first session, would be a way to engage in a democratic process that welcomes and engages all participant voices (Bohny et al., 2016; Brubaker, 2009; Cook, 1992; Kenway & Modra, 1992; Smele et al., 2017). In our sessions, topics did arise despite the fact that we did not deliberately negotiate them. But as Brubaker (2009) argued, “the middle ground of negotiating authority characterized by collective deliberation and conjoint communication cannot be sustained by accident alone” (p. 114). My passive approach to setting the topics took the accidental approach rather than a democratic one (or, goddess forbid, an authoritarian one).

The accidental approach went something like this: Joan bringing the Antonio Brown article to the group and Liz’s experience with her student being triggered led to us discussing sexual assault as it pertained to other group members’ curriculum and practices. But what would our next topic be? At the end of our third session, it was Mary who set the topic for our next meeting. Mary posed a question she had been asking herself, observing in her classes, and reflecting on since the previous session:

Who hasn’t talked recently? . . . But the way in which gender and identity sort of also play into conversations we’re having in class. And what do you do when it’s a room of thirteen white boys and a couple of girls? (Transcript 3, 4 November 2019)

In response, to Mary’s questions, I posted the following “assignment” on our Google Classroom page:

For Nov. 18th: Consider your strategies for calling on students.

- Maybe try keeping track of how often you notice students speaking, raising their hands, or you calling on them.

- What are the patterns? What are your concerns? Is something happening with gender?
- What are some strategies or methods to try to create more balance and to get all voices heard?
- What happens when the class make-up is already really off balance?
- What other factors do we need to consider? (cultural customs, introversion, anxiety, etc.) (Google Classroom Post, 18 November 2019)

Posting this assignment fit into a traditional expectation of the facilitator's role. Still, feminist. The idea came from a participant, rather than me (though, I should have given her more direct credit in the post). In terms of queering, the questions might have helped participants to disrupt their perceptions of gender, though the questions did not directly queer in content or in subverting traditional gendered norms. I might have made a more direct reference to nonbinary and gendernonconforming students to disrupt the male/female binary. I might have reconsidered the wording of "really off balance" when referencing the gender make-up of a classroom, which presumes a problem if there are more male identifying students or more female identifying students. We were discussing gender but not yet through a queer lens, and not yet with a commitment to anti-oppressive action.

Mary's Story: "Who Gets to Speak?" (Kelly, Transcript 4, 18 November 2019)

Sharing stories and personal experiences became the norm of our next few sessions, following a similar pattern to session 3: one participant shared a problem they were currently experiencing or had recently experienced, which elicited encouragement, questions, further analysis, hypothetical responses, related anecdotes, and tangents. As noted by Coia and Taylor (2006):

Stories are part of knowledge construction, and that construction cannot occur in isolation. We have to share our stories in order to push us to think reflectively about our experiences. It is not enough simply to tell the story or write a journal entry; it is the give and take of dialogue that refocuses the lens (Manke & Allender, 2004). We become transformed when we engage in this type of sharing and discussion (Kincheloe & Steinber, 1995). (pp. 19–20)

During our fourth session, with seven participants, two members of the group shared stories: Mary was well-prepared for the topic she proposed the previous session, just as she characterized herself in the first session. She began our discussion with her observations about who was participating in her classroom and her concerns about how to engage more student voices in a more equitable way. She described a dilemma she was experiencing where she found herself calling on quieter students early on in the discussion, only to find the close of the discussion dominated by male students. She explained, “it’s typically always a group of male students and those voices are sort of ending the conversation because I’ve prioritized these other quieter voices in the start” (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). In reflection, Mary theorized, “The best intentions are leading me to a place where I’m not actually sure is helpful from a gendered classroom perspective” (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019).

Our discussion of voices taking up the classroom floor space, questioned whether or not there was a gendered pattern amongst those who speak and those who are silenced. Beyond just holding floor space, Mary also considered the power embedded in when students speak: first and last voices in conversation may imply hierarchical value of the ideas or of the speaker’s status. Mary, Grace, and I offered observations that cisgender male students were more likely to be confident in taking speaking turns, even when they represented the minority in the classroom

demographics. Grace offered the following observation of one of her classes as she attempted to better balance the voices: “I feel like it’s the same five students who are always putting their hands up. But of them, four out of five of them are guys. So, I am cold calling and I don’t really feel like I like that” (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). Tentatively, Liz began to consider gender as a potential factor, though she was careful to acknowledge her observations as anecdotal. Charlie posed a counterexample of a class where the girls are more outspoken than their male peers—maybe to disrupt our assumption that the gender pattern was as rigid or prevalent as we thought.

Engaging student voice has often been a central focus of democratic, critical, feminist, and queer pedagogy in decentering and disrupting usual traditional classroom power relations (e.g. Dewey, 1916; 1938; English, 2008; Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997; Freire, 1970/2004; hooks, 1994). While the participants did not necessarily identify as critical or feminist pedagogues, they were all concerned with the paradoxes and pitfalls of attempting to bring more voices into our class discussions. We discussed the role of shyness, extroversion/introversion, self-confidence, home culture, gendered socialization, classroom gender make-up, leveling, and even time of day as intertwined factors in students contributing. Mary summarized our observations: “So it sounds like, sort of across experience, like across leveling, we have more men who are more willing to talk more of the time. I wonder if they notice that?” (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). Then, she posed the following question to the group for feedback: “How can I, maybe in a more structured way, get students responding to one another in a way that over time might address where the gender disparity is coming from?” (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). Rebecca wondered, “Is that a gender thing or is that just like in general they’re more nervous in other levels?” (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). As Rebecca brought up earlier, she had never

considered gender as an influencing factor. In asking this question, she again disrupted the belief that other participants—myself included—held about the influence of gender (or really gendered socialization) on students voicing their ideas with confidence (Butler, 1994). Mary articulated the idea that it's not so much gender, or one's assigned sex, that determines how a person engages, so much as it is the way students are socialized into performing gender in the classroom. She explained, "I've always heard or read, right, about how men and women are conditioned differently in terms of being polite, or what's appropriate." (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). I viewed Rebecca's questioning of gender as a factor in classroom participation as a gender blindness akin to the color blindness many teachers claim to hold. While their motivation might be equality and acceptance, teachers unintentionally dismiss the reality of race/racism. A refusal to see gender as a factor in classroom dynamics seemed like a refusal to acknowledge the sexism, misogyny, and patriarchal values woven into education at all levels (Pomerantz & Raby, 2017). Then again, I assumed discussing gender meant also discussing sexism, misogyny, and patriarchal values. Were we?

Charlie posed a question that helped us focus on our praxis: "How [do] we provide questions or ask questions to get different people involved?" (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). We shared ideas and strategies to increase student engagement (some of which were more successful than others): cold calling, rolling a die (or other randomization), asking a student who hasn't spoken whether or not they agreed with a previous student's comment, having students reflect on their participation in writing, having students pair and discuss before sharing out to the group, sharing out what their partner said rather than their own ideas, grading participation, working with students outside of class to gauge their hesitancy and to help them form a plan of

action for increasing their participation, and taking teachable moments to discuss who should speak next, etc.

Notably, Charlie's and Mary's questions both focused on what we could do as individual teachers in our separate classrooms to engage more students. However, our questions did not disrupt sexism. Critical feminists have challenged the notion that individual teachers can create safe spaces out of the reach of systemic and structural sexism (Briskin, 1990; Ellsworth, 1992; Manicom, 1992; Orner, 1992). Orner (1992) asked, "Why must the 'oppressed' speak? For whose benefit do we/they speak? How is the speaking received, interpreted, controlled, limited, disciplined and stylized by the speakers, the listeners, the historical moment, the context?" (p. 76). Asking these questions could have engaged us in a queerly feminist perspective of Mary's classroom problem. We assumed without question that speaking is good. Sharing is good. Would we have been satisfied if the following week Mary's class had a seemingly perfect balance of genders taking speaking turns? Would that mean that gender expectations and sexist ideas were not hidden in the corners and peeking out of the textbooks or implicit in the spoken words?

Reflections on Queering Feminist Facilitation

Rather than only dissect Mary's classroom experience and offer her advice, I stepped in with a facilitator's move. I invited the other participants to share their observations to see if we could find patterns. As we were talking about student participation, I hoped this move was a way to encourage all the participants present to share from their own experience. I also did a questionable teacher practice that we discussed later: I "cold-called" one of the participants who speaks less often to share first: Rebecca. While inviting everyone to share their experiences aligns with feminist pedagogy, cold-calling does not align with feminist practices of care. As is the case with many students in a similar position, Rebecca's response pressed back a bit

rebelliously against the request. Rebecca admitted that she had never considered whether gender played a role in how and when students participated. She explained, “I don’t know if I’ve ever actively taken stock on how many times I’m calling on males and females. I don’t actually—know if I’ve ever paid attention to that” (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). She continued:

I don’t do the cold call. So, it’s not—I let everyone write something down, we usually share it with people, I usually try to build the confidence that way and then whoever wants to share gets the opportunity to talk. But I don’t, I don’t know if I’ve ever noticed a gender thing. (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019)

Notably, Rebecca’s descriptions of her practices were democratic and thoughtful: she built in time for students to process, to plan their responses, and to “build the confidence.” Ironically, my calling on her was a practice Rebecca does not engage in, seemingly on principle. In my own teaching practices, I not to cold call students. Why not use those same strategies with my colleagues in this circle? Offering members of our circle a moment to write down their reflections could have been useful in this moment (and others). As I struggled with viewing myself as the facilitator of the group, I often still took on the teacher role by setting an assignment and calling on individuals.

We did not disrupt the gender binary. Most of the conversation assumed students fell into one of two categories: male or female. Our discussion did not acknowledge trans students, genderqueer students, nonbinary students, or any students who do not neatly identify into the male/female categories (Martin, 2014). Our conversation also prioritized having a voice in the classroom in one particular way: speaking during class discussion. We did not consider other ways students share their voices: in writing, in small groups and pair work, etc.

Stories of Vulnerability

As the group began to trust each other more and more, the experiences participants shared revealed more vulnerability. Individuals sharing their stories encouraged others to share. Liz and Mary initiated and modeled how we might use our community space taking turns sharing our experiences, problems, questions, and insecurities with the other members. As Kishimoto and Mwangi (2009) described, “Self-disclosure and vulnerability are often mutually inclusive. Self-disclosure often opens somebody up for scrutiny and renders one vulnerable” (p. 91). To Liz’s and Mary’s stories, group members responded with empathy, support, and encouragement, and in doing so, we established a practice and pattern of not scrutinizing one another. The stories that followed, especially those told by Rebecca and Grace, further expressed vulnerability.

Rebecca’s Story: “Are There Any More Allies in the School?” (Charlie, Transcript 4, 18 November 2019)

Rebecca was a non-tenured history teacher who identified as white, cis/het and married. A committed and consistent member of the group, Rebecca often observed and listened more than she shared. She described herself as wanting to learn and not knowing much about gender or sexuality: “I’m kinda here because I don’t know a lot of this language. I’m more here to learn a little bit. I feel more confident about other aspects of social justice. . . . I don’t even know where to start” (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019). In session 4, Rebecca told a story that she had not planned on sharing. She did not share because she thought it was connected to gender and sexuality or our group’s discussion, but because she was experiencing stress and frustration on that particular day with one of her classes. She shared because she couldn’t *not* share. Rebecca divulged the following:

Sometimes you get a toxic person in the room. I have a toxic class and it just sets off a series of events in the class in U.S. II this year and it make[s] it really difficult to have people share their opinions. I've had students say they don't want to share their opinions in front of another student. . . . You know it makes it hard and then other kids don't want to talk and that's going to make things even less organic or stifle conversation, stifle voices, whether that's guys or girls or whatever. (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019)

Rebecca seemed resistant to viewing this event as gendered. She first described the class as “toxic” but amended it to a particular student as “toxic.” She described the difficulty and side effects of a toxic environment, which she said can, “stifle voices, whether that's guys or girls or whatever.” Was Rebecca trying to make a connection to gender because we were in a PLC session? Was she preemptively dismissing the idea that a toxic male student would stifle the voices of other girls more than other boys? For Rebecca, it was clear he was having a toxic effect that was dominating the entire room, but whether or not his toxic behavior affected the class by gender, she doubted. As we discussed how to respond to a toxic student and classroom environment, Rebecca posed a different gendered interpretation of the student's attitude. She explained, “I think he just doesn't like me because I'm a woman. He doesn't like that the teacher is a female” (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). While Rebecca did not believe the young women in the room were more silenced by this student than the boys/males/men in the room, she theorized that he held underlying issues with her authority because of her gender. Rebecca gave no further reasoning for her conclusion but she sensed that the student's underlying issue was misogynistic. Rebecca noted that the student was a 12th grader in an 11th grade class who had a recent outburst on a day she showed a film clip that included Senator Bernie Sanders. The group focused on this factor as a possible explanation for some of his issues with power. Liz asked, “I

don't know the situation, but do you think he feels different because he's the oldest one?" (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). In addition to a layer of male power and privilege, Liz wondered what role his age and grade level increased his frustration and combative behavior. He might feel "different" or othered in this class, which might fuel his antagonism toward Rebecca and the rest of his classmates. A third layer in his power struggle might be his conservative political views, which separated him further from a school that is predominantly socially progressive. I focused on this aspect to add to Liz's thinking: "I know there's a few conservative students in this school who feel confrontational with this school's population. You know they feel like, 'I'm constantly being shut down here,' so there's a defensiveness" (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019).

In our theorizing about Rebecca's toxic class, we empathized with Rebecca and attempted to offer support and solutions. Charlie asked, "Are there any other allies in the school?" Interestingly, Charlie followed by listing three potential allies in our school, all of whom are men: a coach, a special services teacher, and the assistant principal. The suggestion to turn to male authority figures who might be able to positively influence the student could be a way to hold up the traditional, patriarchal views of authority. Since the student in question might hold sexist assumptions, tagging a male colleague would not disrupt his views of women in authority.

I asked, "So how do you press restart on an environment?" (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). Rebecca replied:

That's what I'm trying to figure out. I want people to share, as long as it's a safe comment, as long as—and he hasn't said anything like that. . . . I don't know if it has to

do with power imbalance or gender. It's pretty much equal boys and girls. The girls are very quiet in that room, except if they're complaining. (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019)

To close the session, I reiterated Charlie's question to focus on Rebecca's next steps and actions: "Find your allies first. Inside the room, outside the room. Who's there?" (Transcript 4, 18 November 2019). It should be noted that Rebecca had found a group of allies in our circle. We were the "outside the room" allies.

Grace's Story: "What Can We Learn from This?" (Grace, Transcript 5, 9 December 2019)

Grace, a tenured English teacher with almost twenty years of classroom experience, was known for her caring demeanor. Grace and I co-created the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition course that uses critical lenses to examine classism, sexism, and racism. In our fifth session, Grace shared an emotional and difficult experience when seniors in her English seminar class used offensive slurs as handle names. Grace's experience presented a different challenge than Liz's experience. Liz's student approached her outside of class and before feeling duress, which gave Liz time to process and prepare how to respond. Mary's experience came from her observations noticing patterns in her classroom; she, too, had time to consider, process, and prepare. Grace's experience required an immediate response to seniors who used offensive names during an activity with a game-based learning platform that allowed students to use anonymous, self-appointed handles. The handles two students chose were "Ray Pist" and "Fah Gutz." Grace had an immediate, emotional reaction. Her story challenged our group to consider the moments we are less prepared for. Her story prompted the questions: How do we respond when the moment is harmful and emotional to ourselves, as well as students? How can we turn an offense into a teachable moment? In sharing her story, Grace chose to be vulnerable and to re-experience the trauma of the moment. Grace described her initial response:

So, I shut the game down immediately, and told them that I was really unhappy. . . . I sat and thought about it and regrouped. And then what I said was that I was angry and disappointed and hurt. And that, um, especially after I prefaced it by saying that I needed it to be appropriate names, and I said that ‘In no way were rape jokes funny. This wasn’t funny. Neither were slurs against gay people.’ And I’m getting emotional again. And I said that um, “the people there owed the class an apology. But since they probably weren’t going to do that right now, I was going to apologize to the class on their behalf.” (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019)

As Grace continued her story, she divulged some of her insecurities about the incident and the way she leaned on fellow group members for support following the incident:

So, then I talked to [Charlie]; you talked me off the ledge. And I was talking to Kelly and Harper today at lunch, and I was saying . . . I tend to internalize this. Like, I think, “Oh, if I were a tougher, stricter, meaner teacher, would they do this? Is it personal? Why would they do this to me?” And then the other thing I do, I go, I veer in the opposite direction, say, “No. This is just what happens. This is just what kids do.” And Kelly was suggesting, “Well, neither may be right, exactly.” (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019)

On the day of the incident, Grace sought counsel from three of our group members. She had a network of support to reach out to in a moment of frustration and hurt. So, while she brought this story to our session on the Monday following the Friday incident, the conversations between her and individual group members were in progress and ongoing on both Friday and Monday. Grace spoke about internalizing the incident: blaming herself and questioning what she did wrong to deserve this behavior. Grace’s questions revealed a struggle with the power of authoritarianism in managing classroom behavior. She wondered about whether being “tougher, stricter, meaner”

would have preemptively kept students from choosing offensive slurs as their handles. Though, the prevention of misbehavior would not address the misogyny and homophobia embedded in the students' prank. The question implied a desire to avoid this kind of harmful interaction. Because relationships between students and teachers are personal, Grace internalized the behavior as a failing of their bond and a failing of herself. By asking, "Why would they do this to me?" Grace momentarily positioned herself as the individual being victimized and harmed. And she *was* emotionally harmed in this moment. But she quickly recognized that she was not the only person who experienced harm. She explained, "And then I thought, you know, 'There are probably students, who knows what their experiences are? You know, this is hurting *them*'" (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019). Grace's empathy spurred her to act. She repositioned herself as having a voice for others in the room who were voiceless and having the power to disrupt and confront misogyny and homophobia rather than ignore it or dismiss it as merely immature pranks. An important part of what Grace did in the moment was to name the offenses directly for what they were: rape jokes and slurs against gay people. She took a firm stance that these were "not funny." She proposed the action that people should apologize but she anticipated that they would not. She modeled the action she expected by apologizing for the guilty.

Grace moved through several stages processing this experience. Briefly, she assumed that the students behind the offensive names were cisgender, male athletes. She admitted, "I kind of am calling myself out, . . . I assumed that it was the guy athletes in the room, kind of the bros, you know. . . . But now, I'm thinking, 'What does that reveal?'" (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019). Being part of our community—intentionally thinking about and discussing gender—offered Grace space for critical self-reflection. She questioned and disrupted first her students' behavior and thinking and then her own behavior and thinking. The willingness to question her

assumptions reflected an important tool of intersectional feminist pedagogy. How can students become reflexive, critical thinkers if their teachers are not? Though, Grace's assumption may have been built on patterns of gender performance that push young men to acts of homophobia.

Kumashiro (2002) explained:

In fact, to be masculine, males must constantly prove that they are not feminine. They often do this through acts of homophobia. Being "masculine" requires distancing themselves from anything queer. After all, men deemed queer generally fall at the bottom of the hierarchy of men (p. 156).

Grace's assumption that the students were the "bros" might be related to her understanding of why homophobia and misogyny are perpetuated in classrooms. Male students build and maintain their gender status hierarchy by demeaning and oppressing women and queer identifying classmates. Though, it's interesting that this particular act was cloaked in anonymity: a tool that protected and probably emboldened the students in their actions.

The incident of homophobia and misogyny did provide an opportunity to have students critically examine this hierarchy and their own behavior and motivation in upholding sexism and heterosexism. Grace had the inclination to make it a teachable moment. She asked, "What can we learn from this? And hopefully making it teachable. How do I restart and rebuild trust in the classroom and make things comfortable again?" (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019). Paradoxically, Grace's goals may have been in conflict with one another: a paradox of returning to comfort. To rebuild trust following this incident she could have (should have?) involved an uncomfortable discussion—not to find culprits or to assign blame but to engage the soon-to-be adult students in reflection and discussion about the harm seemingly childish pranks actually perpetuate. To pause and give time to this type of discussion, however, conflicted with Grace's second goal of

returning to a place of comfort. I proposed to Grace that one option might be to use a Google form to ask students the question: “How do we restart and rebuild trust?” I often use forms to collect feedback from students (sometimes anonymously). The forms offer students a chance to process and reflect in writing before engaging in a difficult conversation during class. The feedback collected can be shared with students and then together the class can discuss what to do and how to proceed, which emphasizes their roles as members of a community and reminds them that their actions and choices affect others in the community in ways that can either break or build trust. Grace chose a path of lesser resistance. She acknowledged my idea but decided to move the class forward after an acknowledgment of the incident. She explained to us what she said to her class:

Friday didn't go well. I would like for us to restart and for everyone to have a second chance. So, we're going to have a discussion. And then, we'll see how it goes. And then at the end of it, maybe we can have some fun. (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019)

I understood this response. But I also harbored some disappointment (which I did not vocalize in the group session). Grace had emphasized her desire to “make it a teachable moment” but I wondered: what did they learn in this moment? What opportunity was missed to transform this into a teachable moment? The desire to restore comfort, order, and business as usual weighs heavily on teachers. Engaging further in this conversation would have been a difficult task for Grace with many factors to consider: her own emotional readiness to engage further, the potential of further traumatizing other students in the classroom, the pressure to get back to the content and curriculum of the course, etc. In neoliberal institutions, teachers must grapple and negotiate with the appeal of comfort against the potential growth in discomfort (Murray & Kalayji, 2018; Pereira, 2012). Murray and Kalayji (2018) argued:

Comfortable classrooms are unlikely to subvert anything and though we do not wish to fetishise discomfort, we recognise that it is never absent; if it is not widely seen and felt, then it is running along the grooves of existing structures of power rather than against them. (p. 14)

Balancing when and how to lean into moments of discomfort is the ongoing struggle of queer and feminist pedagogues. I cannot fault Grace for choosing to return to comfort. Grace did disrupt the moment, she named the oppression she witnessed and experienced, she expressed her own hurt, and she apologized to the class. Each of these moves relayed important messages to her class. Maybe pressing restart and offering second chances was more about compassion, rather than avoidance.

Gender Roles in Teaching: “Is that fair to expect?” (Harper, Transcript 5, 9 December 2019)

Even without negotiated topics, we formed informal topics from the participants’ observations, concerns, questions, struggles, and reading. For instance, Harper and Veronica brought up the topic of students’ expectations of teachers in performing traditional gender roles. After discussing Mary’s topic about student voice in the previous session, I shared an optional article to read: “Miles to go: The continuing quest for gender equity in the classroom” (Andrus et al., 2018) that led to a discussion of representation of students in STEM courses and humanities courses and corresponding representation of teachers in those courses. From there, we engaged in the following discussion that delved into the way gender roles shape our students’ perceptions of us and our perceptions of ourselves as “good” educators:

Harper: I think the stereotypes of just being a woman, like, that are very traditionally nurturing, [are] definitely the expectations of teachers, too. That we’re nurturing,

that we are there for them, that we're caring. All of these female, woman-oriented adjectives.

Others: Mmhmm.

Harper: And I just—I think I struggle with that because it's very true, and I do feel like I try to embody that. But I also wonder sometimes, is that fair to expect? You know?

Veronica: I think it's best practice for all teachers, and it's not fair that students tend to only get that from women. . . .

Charlie: This [article] even says, like, "they are more likely to be fully engaged by caring teachers, who set high standards and provide ample ways to meet them" (Andrus et al., 2018, para. 12).

Veronica: Exactly. Yeah. Female teachers are associated with caring about their students. If male teachers are not, that's a problem.

Kelly: Yeah. Absolutely. We can talk—that might be a whole topic. Do we want to spend a day on gender roles of teachers and expectations? . . . I've thought about that, too. But sometimes, I think, because I'm not caring and nurturing enough.

Harper grappled with the traditional stereotypes associated with women and teachers who identify as cisgender female: being nurturing and caring. Harper admitted she "struggled" with these associations even though she does try to "embody" a nurturing presence. According to Rousmaniere (1994), the expectations of women teachers to be nurturing and motherly is embedded deeply in the history of education, as were the subsequent issues of discipline: "Women teachers were taught to feel the weight of their failures personally, believing that lapses in classroom discipline were a consequence of their *own* failures rather than a result of their

working conditions” (p. 50). Harper asked a critical question: “Is that fair?” Should students expect teachers who identify as female to be nurturing and caring? Should women teachers expect themselves to be nurturers? I have grappled with these questions myself. I offered a confession to the group by admitting I do not feel nurturing enough. But what is nurturing *enough*? I value empathy and care but I am not a mother and do not view myself as a nurturer in the typical way. If I do not treat my students in a motherly way, will I meet their expectations? Veronica appeared more certain in declaring the value of nurturing and caring as “best practice” for all educators regardless of gender. She prioritized the traits of nurturing and caring perceived as feminine and set the expectation that male teachers should also embody them. She stated concisely, “If male teachers are not [caring], that’s a problem.” Kenway and Modra (1992) argued: “Nurturing qualities have always been assumed to be female traits. However, Martin (1985) argues that both sexes are capable of the “generative love of parents” which is increasingly recognized as vital to the survival of society” (p.153). Rather than expect women teachers to nurture and men teachers to discipline, we need to disrupt the values. Caring is not a feminine trait, but a human one. And, as Veronica noted, a crucial component when working with youth.

The undeclared but implied questions circulating the group in this dialogue seemed to be: Are teachers who identify as male expected to be nurturing and caring? Are they nurturing and caring in practice? These questions brought us into a discussion of gendered expectations in relation to power, authority, and classroom management:

Veronica: [Students] have a certain, I think, classroom management style they expect from women and men.

Charlie: I know. I have always felt that way about, I'm like, "Oh, it must be so much easier to be a male teacher."

Harper: Yeah. So much less expectations, to be honest. (Laughter)

Charlie: They just listen to you. Like, they just listen to male teachers. (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019)

The four of us present (all of whom identify as cisgender women), perceived our cisgender male colleagues as having it "easier," as Charlie put it. In Harper's estimation, men not having to live up to the expectations of being nurturing and caring also translated to having "less expectations" in general. Veronica believed that students held different expectations for classroom management based on their teacher's gender. Charlie built on Veronica's theory about classroom management by suggesting students were more likely to listen to male teachers. Embedded in these statements are assumptions about authority and gender roles. Do students listen and comply more with men than with women educators? Are men perceived to be better at classroom management than women? Are men discouraged from being nurturers, even in the classroom? Our perceptions mirrored those of participants in Wood's (2012) study of elementary school teachers who tended to believe that, among their colleagues, women were more nurturing than men but men garnered more respect and more success in discipline. Several studies have found that students rate women teachers more harshly on evaluations (Arbuckle & Williams, 2003; Bianchini et al., 2012; Mengel et al., 2019; Potvin & Hazari, 2016).

In our dialogue, Charlie, Harper, Veronica, and I admitted fears, insecurities, assumptions, biases, and expectations. This dialogue may have been a litmus test for the measure of safety developing in our group. The smaller group present for this discussion or the personalities of the four present could have contributed to our willingness to share. Charlie and I

have had a close relationship as co-teachers for several years but Veronica and Harper were both new to the school. Their willingness to be open with us signaled their comfort and trust in voicing their opinions and feelings in the circle. We expressed little judgment of one another's views but we did express judgments of men and their experiences teaching. Our conversation "othered" our male colleagues. Not having any men present in the circle on this day (though, two men are regular participants in the circle) may have contributed to our willingness to voice beliefs that teaching, classroom management, and discipline are easier for them. Focused more on our own struggles with gender roles, we did not consider the ways in which gender roles also limit and hurt men in education.

Pronouns: "What are your pronouns? I will use them." (Rebecca, Transcript 6, 6 January 2020)

It was not until our sixth session (6 January 2020) that we discussed sexuality more explicitly. Our topics had focused primarily on gender: teachers' gender roles, gender balance of voices in our classrooms, etc. This delay may be explained by different levels of comfort and familiarity with the topics. Discussing traditional gender roles is more familiar for many of us. Sexuality as a topic tends to be more taboo, especially in schools. In an attempt to set a topic for the next session, I mentioned Liz's idea of faculty adding pronouns to their email signatures. Rather than conclude our session, participants took the related topic of students' pronouns. Joan Rebecca, and Dale began to brainstorm how they might immediately change their practices in addressing students' pronouns in the following exchange:

Kelly: I think next time we can talk more about pronouns. Liz wanted to talk about, uh, faculty adding pronouns to their email signatures. So, we can bring that up further.

Joan: That's true. I can't believe I never thought about just making a blanket statement to the class about, "Tell me." Or we can think of ways—

Kelly: Yeah, I put it on my syllabus this year. I put it on my syllabus and my email signature.

Joan: —(to students) "If I'm, If I'm using the wrong pronoun, correct me."

Participants: Right. Right.

Rebecca: If your name is Daniel, and you want to be called Dan, like, I would like to know that.

Dale: If you, yeah but, instead of—like a lot of kids don't want to tell everyone else in the room.

Joan: Yeah.

Dale: So, on an index card, where you have your name and phone number and what's the best way to contact me, put my pronouns or other important information. And say, "The other important information could include your pronouns"—

Joan: Dietary restrictions—

Dale: Anything.

Rebecca: It doesn't have to be like this whole thing. It could just be nonchalantly, like,

"What are your pronouns? I will use them." (Transcript 6, 6 January 2020)

This exchange was energetic, positive, and empathetic. Joan had an epiphany moment about pronouns. She realized that she could have been using an inclusive statement at the opening of a course: "If I'm using the wrong pronouns, correct me." A statement like this would signal to all students that their teacher is making an effort to be an ally and is open to correction. Rebecca's comparison to a student named Daniel wanting to be called 'Dan' emphasized how

fundamental a pronoun request is to a student's identity: it is no different than calling a student by their preferred name. Dale pushed the group to consider how to approach pronouns further by reminding us that some students may not be comfortable announcing to the class what their pronouns are, nor would some feel comfortable correcting a teacher who has misgendered them publicly. Dale offered an alternative way to learn students' pronouns: collecting an index card from each student with relevant or "important information." Implicit in this suggestion was consideration for students' privacy, safety, as well as the power to choose how and when they reveal their pronouns. In fact, the suggestions made by Joan, Rebecca, and Dale are all listed in Cross's (2020) suggestions for educators in being more inclusive and affirming of gender queer and nonbinary students. Our discussion of pronouns concluded with Joan imagining a completely different way to approach gender and pronouns as a society:

Dale: I'm trying to use non-gender specific words . . . to really consciously make an effort to be non-gender specific.

Joan: Can you imagine if we also just used "their" for everybody, as like the default?

And be like, "Oh, I'm sorry, did you want to opt into a gender pronoun?"

(Laughter)

Kelly: I think that's a great idea.

Joan: It'd be pretty cool.

Dale: It would make a lot more sense. (Transcript 6, 6 January 2020)

Joan posed a queer alternative to the traditional binary practice of assigning pronouns. For the most part, people assume another person's gender by making judgments based on their gender expression and appearance. We tend to guess a person's gender and a person's pronouns. This all-too-common approach inevitably leads to misgendering others. Instead, Joan's approach—

which maybe seemed farfetched in the moment—proposed everyone be invited to “opt into a gendered pronoun.” Joan was able to imagine not only a queer-inclusive revision to our practice but a queer practice as the starting point. While we laughed, and found it humorous on one level, we also agreed: it would be better. How far off are we from this type of queer future? Can queer become norm? Waite (2019) imagined this “truly impossible queer present” (p. 52). She described, “I would love to actually have this problem, to one day think to myself aw shucks, now everyone is writing in such queer ways, just what will we do now?” (p. 52). Imagining these queer futures is a way for heterosexual teachers to disrupt their own notions of heteronormativity and to become, momentarily, “queerly intelligible” (Ruffolo, 2007, p. 270). In this moment, Joan facilitated a queerly intelligible moment for all of us: a moment of possibility, optimism, playfulness, and inclusivity.

Reflections on Queering Feminist Facilitation

In sessions 3, 4, and 5, we found a rhythm as a group sharing and debriefing our experiences. As a facilitator, I had not yet found my confidence or my path. My researcher’s journal entries from these sessions focus on my feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. At the time, I did not recognize the vagueness of my role as a way I was (subconsciously) subverting the boundaries of my usual definition of facilitator and facilitation. I focused on my failure, which can also be an opportunity to engage in queering perception and self (Coll & Charlton, 2018; Glasby, 2019; Halberstam, 1998; 2011).

During our 4th session, I forgot to bring my phone, which I was using to audio-record our sessions. I admonished myself in my journal that afternoon: “I have to remember to be more organized during 7th periods on Mondays when the PLC meets” (Researcher’s Journal, 18 November 2019). Forgetting a cell phone or a recording device is a relatively small and common

hiccup but remembering the device was one of my few responsibilities as the facilitator. Not remembering, therefore, made me feel insecure at the outset of the meeting. My feelings of shaky confidence continued:

I am also feeling a little self-conscious about my participation this week. It felt like several times after I spoke there was just silence. This makes me feel like my comments might stifle conversation rather than encourage more dialogue. (Researcher's Journal, 9 December 2019)

When I voiced this same concern to Charlie, she reassured me that that was not her perception of my participation. She also encouraged me to listen back to the audio recording as she surmised that doing so would contradict my perceptions of my participation turns. As is often the case, I may have hyperbolized my flaws as a facilitator—something the other participants were not likely focused on. Charlie's thoughts on the audio-recording proved accurate, as I did not find notable gaps of silence after my statements, except in one portion of the discussion where we discussed Andrus et al. (2018). This was the only session where I "assigned" a reading. In our discussion, I felt more like I was drawing on my experience as a graduate student engaged in a seminar discussion. I reflected, "I wonder if some of my comments were more like grad school student responses. Like I was bringing in my practice and habits, . . . and maybe those don't translate well to the PLC" (Researcher's Journal Code, 28 August 2020). Of course, I drew on my experience as a graduate student but why did I feel it was problematic to do so? In my role as a member of this group, I wanted to deemphasize my authority over the subject matter but discussing this article only highlighted

Charlie, my co-teacher and close friend, often acted as my cheerleader. Her participation in our circle may have been motivated by our friendship and her desire to support me more so

than her interest in discussing gender and sexuality. For instance, knowing that this PLC is the basis of my dissertation study, Charlie asked at the end of one session: “Do you feel like we’re helping you?” (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019). To which I exclaimed, “It’s not about me! I’m gonna end right there (laughter as I paused the recording device)” (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019). We all laughed. But it also made me reflect on the participants’ motivation to participate in the circle. In my journal, I wrote:

So, this makes me feel like people might be participating not for themselves but out of kindness and friendship and generosity to me. The sentiment is nice but this isn’t what I want! (Researcher’s Journal, 9 December 2019).

Besides friendship, I wondered if some of the other participants went along with the topics of gender and sexuality because it was my suggestion. In our fifth session, when I asked participants to think about lows and highs from their week, Veronica asked, “Still focused on gender?” (Transcript 5, 9 December 2019). The question surprised me. Maybe it implied that Veronica had not reflected on gender or sexuality much that week. Maybe it implied that she would like to move onto other topics of social justice. Maybe it did not imply anything.

While our sessions were running smoothly, and we had found a routine of sharing stories and supporting one another, our 4th and 5th sessions had much lower attendance than our first few (seven and five attendees, respectively). The dropping attendance worried me. I reflected:

Maybe December is just busy. Three different people let me know why they weren’t able to come, which is nice. But there are a few other people who I haven’t heard from in a little while. This makes me think that some of them aren’t getting a lot out of our meetings. That would be sad for me. I want these meetings to be productive, effective,

useful for each of them. So, if [they're] not, that's something I hope we can address. I'm thinking about having them do a reflection. (Researcher's Journal, 9 December 2019)

My concerns here were less about me and more focused on the participants. Gauging whether or not a group is working for those involved should be of vital importance to queer, feminist, and activist researchers (Kumashiro, 2002). In response to my concerns, I offered the group an optional reflection through a Google Form. Reflecting in writing, I hoped, would offer each participant time to think, process, and articulate their ideas on their own time rather than having to express them on the spot, in person, and in front of others. I wanted to make it optional, too, so that there was no obligation or added stress. Teaching already requires so many tasks beyond the classroom, I did not want to add to the burden. In addition to asking about which upcoming dates worked best, I posed two optional prompts for reflection: 1) Describe your experience participating in this PLC; and 2) How do you feel about sharing the leadership of the PLC? What ideas do you have to share leadership and responsibility moving forward? Seven participants responded to the first question and four participants to the second. Those who responded to the survey expressed positive feelings about their experience. Two participants appreciated that we met regularly and frequently. Others expressed appreciation for having a group they could share with and for what they were learning. One participant reflected, "I'm happy to have a safe space to discuss issues and raise questions. I'm learning from the experiences of others and becoming more reflective in my own teaching" (Optional Reflection, January 2020). Another participant stated, "I think the environment we have created with this PLC allows members to share openly and honestly about what they are seeing/experiencing in their classrooms and at MHS" (Optional Reflection, January 2020). A third participant explained:

I like that there is a sense that all voices are valued. I think that is, really, inherent to the whole philosophy of the PLC. All seats at the table matter, just as we want our students to feel all seats in the classroom matter. We're trying to live our values. (Optional Reflection, January 2020)

The metaphor of having a seat at the table has long been used to describe having a voice, having power, and having access to discussions that affect change. This participant expressed the value of having all of our voices heard and connected that value to what they/we also attempt to create in our classrooms: democratic space. The survey responses suggested that many members of the group perceived our space as fostering community, vulnerability, learning, and self-reflection. Despite my fears and anxieties about how to facilitate, the community was forming and participants were invested.

In terms of sharing leadership, fewer people (four) responded to this question. Of those, only two of the four expressed interest in potentially leading a session: one said they were “tentatively” interested and the other suggested they would feel more comfortable in a pair. A third respondent said they did not feel comfortable. In explanation, they wrote, “I feel as though I still have so much to learn and so many others have such a better grasp on gender and sexuality issues than I do” (Optional Reflection, January 2020). The prospect of sharing leadership often causes discomfort, even amongst adults (Bohny et al., 2016; Coia & Taylor, 2013; Taylor & Coia, 2006). This place of discomfort was an opportunity to disrupt and queer our usual behavior, though few participants did. Still, two participants’ willingness to venture into discomfort by sharing leadership marked some progress.

Cycle 3: Problem Solving

After three months and six sessions together, I noticed a shift in our focus from working on our own classrooms, pedagogy, praxis, and curriculum, to considering how we might be of more use to our broader community. I viewed this as a new phase in our critical cycle: problem solving on a community level. We shifted from wanting to better ourselves as individual practitioners to also wanting to transform our environment. The shift began when Liz stopped me in the hallway one day to pose an idea about meeting with student organizations to gather their feedback. She was wondering, what would students want teachers in a group like this to do or to know and understand about their experiences and needs? I encouraged Liz to post an announcement on the stream of our Google Classroom page. She wrote the following note:

Hi, all! I wanted to get everyone's thoughts on an idea after chatting with Kelly about it. I wondered if we should reach out to some student organizations, such as the [Gender and Sexuality Alliance], and ask if they have a "wish list" for action items they believe MHS needs. We could try to figure out how to support their efforts/goals. This could be useful both in terms of gathering data about student perceptions, as well as, of course, helping students enact any changes for which faculty support would be helpful. If you have any ideas or feedback about this, please post them here. Thanks! (GC Post, 13 January 2020).

Within a few days, five participants (including myself) had commented offering their support of this idea and volunteering to participate. Liz's proposal aligned with Freire's (1970/2004) advice for educators who want to partner with the oppressed: she focused on our role as being one of support and help. The ideas and actions would come from the students. Her proposal focused on our group first being listeners and gathering data. In a way, we could employ the culture circle model: engaging in dialogue to problem pose and problem solve (Souto-Manning, 2010).

Engaging students as political, knowledgeable, empowered resources also disrupts typical neoliberal, patriarchal schooling (Blackburn et al., 2018; Rodriguez, 1998; Wernick et al., 2014; Woolley, 2017). In a traditional patriarchal setting, students seeking change must approach authority figures who wield the power to say “yes” or “no” to their requests. We subverted the practice. Rather than authority figures with the power to enact their ideas, we positioned ourselves as collaborators, listeners, and supporters.

Critical Incident: Partnering with Student Clubs

Inspired by Liz’s suggestion to reach out to student organizations, we spent our February session brainstorming how to best proceed with contacting and meeting with student groups. In our seventh session, 10 February 2020, we planned how to approach the student groups, what questions to ask, and who would take the lead in setting up the meetings. Session 8 on 9 March 2020 included a debrief of the first student group meeting. Ideas began pouring out. Besides meeting with student groups, participants suggested other actions such as creating a survey for students and faculty to take that gathered their perceptions of gender and sexuality. One participant suggested we seek out professional development for the faculty from organizations focused on LGBTQ+ advocacy for educators. Another idea involved focusing on awareness and training for athletic teams and coaches. We discussed hosting a viewing of Representation Project’s documentary, *The Mask You Live In* (Newsom et al., 2015). We were problem solving and getting ready to take action. We also discussed talking to administration about inviting speakers focused on gender and sexuality for students during the state testing time allotted for assemblies. We identified four student groups that may be interested in meeting with us: the Feminist Club, the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA), the Young Democrats, and the Young Republicans. One of our group members, Michelle, was the advisor for the Feminist Club, and

another, Rebecca was the advisor for the young Democrats, which gave us immediate communication with two groups. On a shared Google document, interested participants signed up for the group they wanted to visit: Liz and Charlie signed up to visit the feminist club, while Grace, Veronica, Mary, and Dale signed up to visit the GSA. No participants signed up for either the young Democrats or young Republicans. Next, we brainstormed questions:

- What's your wish list from your teachers? What do you want to happen?
- How would you want us to help?
- What can we do?
- How do we want our school to look?
- Classroom culture?
- Peer change and peer awareness? Adult / staff awareness?
- [What are] "Easy" fixes / long-term fixes / more complex fixes?
- How could we form an on-going relationship with them? (Notes, 10 February 2020)

From this list, Liz and Charlie selected questions to pose to the feminist club. They emailed with the advisor of the club, Michelle, who is also a member of the PLC, to set a date convenient for them. The Feminist Club were enthusiastic about having faculty members attend their meeting to hear their ideas. Liz and Charlie used large chart paper; on the top half they wrote the question: "What would the best school/peer/classroom culture look like?" (Charlie, Email Communication, 3 March 2020). They then folded the bottom half up so that it would be covered. The bottom half was split into two sections: "Easy fixes" and "Long-term fixes" (Charlie, Email Communication, 3 March 2020).

Charlie and Liz debriefed with the PLC by taping the chart paper on the white board in our usual meeting room. They stood in front of the group besides the chart paper—a different configuration for us, as we usually sit in a circle. They explained how the meeting went. In Charlie’s estimation, it was a fair amount of complaining about school. As PLC members asked if different topics related to gender inequality arose (e.g. fewer girls in STEM and fewer boys in humanities), Liz and Charlie shook their heads. Liz explained, “I think even for their concerns it was hard to figure out what an actionable step would be. That was the nice thing about dress code. It felt like, ‘Okay, here’s this thing’” (Transcript 8, 9 March 2020). Charlie elaborated:

I mean, I think Liz and myself just let them talk. We didn’t really guide them anywhere. Maybe if we went back, we could. But we also wanted to, I think, I wanted to, you know, create a, you know, relationship, a rapport. You know, and not be like, “We’re not talking about that right now. We want to talk about this.” So, we kind of just let them run.

(Transcript 9, 10 March 2020)

Charlie’s explanation of the protocol she and Liz chose to follow in the meeting with the feminist club paralleled my own approach and tensions facilitating our circle. Liz prioritized finding items that were “actionable” that we could use to direct our next steps. Charlie prioritized the building of a relationship first, rather than acquiring the material we were looking for or pushing the conversation in a particular direction. Charlie’s approach seemed feminist and democratic in her motivation. In Charlie’s response, I heard echoes of my own struggle in deciding how much to plan and direct the content of our meetings. To what extent should they plan and redirect conversation back to a specific topic? To what extent should they allow the students’ interests and ideas to direct the conversation? To what extent should they discuss inequality and oppression with students if the students seem unaware or uninterested? As we pondered together

whether or not we should show the feminist club data about gender imbalances in our school's leveling or in humanities and STEM courses, we had the following dialogue:

Kelly: One of the complaints against feminists is that they do this evil thing where they tell people they're oppressed. And the complaint is—

Charlie: Yeah.

Kelly: —stop telling—just let people believe that they're not. Stop telling people they're oppressed. Which I'm not—not the way I see it—but when it comes to something like this—is that, should we be opening their eyes to it?

Veronica: Right. If they don't feel oppressed is it because they've like internalized oppression—

Kelly: Right.

Veronica: —or, or is it because they really do feel what we're feeling.

Charlie: Or they don't care when someone says, "Be a man." Like they don't think it's anything.

Grace: I don't know. It's interesting. Because my sister had this question when she was in college because she was in the South for college, and she had a Black professor asking students, it was a mixed race class, asking students how they felt about confederate flags. And there were some in the downtown area, and maybe it was because they were in a mixed race class, but the Black students said it was no big deal. It didn't bother them. They didn't care. So, I don't know, sometimes I think it's a defense for people like, "None of this bothers me. I don't notice it. I don't care."

Kelly: Right.

Grace: Like why, because if you really let yourself feel all the microaggressions, then, you have to do something about it. You have to either stand up for yourself, or you're going to be upset, or—

Kelly: And that's exhausting.

Grace: It is exhausting. (Transcript 9, 10 March 2020)

In the first half of this exchange, we resisted simplified explanations and solutions. We grappled with what we did not know: why students in a feminist club did not see or care about the issues of gender inequality we had assumed would be apparent to them. Several queer theorists argued in favor of embracing and repositioning ignorance (Britzman, 1998; Luhmann, 1998; Shlasko, 2005). Shlasko (2005) articulated, “This kind of ignorance may represent a profound kind of wisdom. Lacking answers, we are able to embrace questions, engage with multiple understandings, and imagine new possibilities” (p. 129). Through our dialogue, Veronica, Charlie, and Grace developed multiple understandings and attempted to imagine different possibilities. Grace began her anecdote about her sister's college experience with the phrase, “I don't know”: an acknowledgment of her uncertainty and lack of personal experience. Then, she made an attempt to make sense of the feminist club's response by offering an anecdote of her sister's experience in a mixed-race class discussing the confederate flag. Grace did not offer a simple explanation but she did imagine why a student of color might take the stance that the confederate flag does not bother them. While sitting with the discomfort of ignorance, practicing empathy and comparison provided some comfort. Notably, Grace and I seemed to dismiss the idea that the Black students in her sister's class and the members of the Feminist Club were not truly offended by gender inequality or racism. Instead, we reasoned, that their positions at the time were more self-protective or possibly subconscious. We imagined they were choosing to

dismiss signs of oppression as a means to survive an oppressive world. As Veronica noted, the internalization of oppression is common. Several versions of racial identity development models allude to internalized prejudice as an early stage of development (Cross, 1991; Hoffman, 1985; Poston, 1990). Models for members of the LGBTQ+ community share similar stages of identity development (Cass, 1979; Fassinger & McCarn, 1997). Rejection of oppression in the lives of members of marginalized groups is fairly commonplace. This problem was recognized by Pomerantz and Raby (2017) as a paradox related to the assumption of post-feminism in the West. They explained:

But ironically, the pervasive belief that gender inequality should be treated as nothing more than the problem of individuals has enabled sexism to flourish through a catch-22: the post-feminist landscape suggests that girls have achieved gender equality, making feminism obsolete, while it in fact perpetuates a system of political inequality that makes feminism more relevant than ever. In other words, the very situation that makes feminism useful precludes the context that necessitates feminism. (p. 94)

It seemed we were caught in this catch-22. We never concluded whether or not it was our duty to try to encourage members of the Feminist Club to see microaggressions and gender inequality present in our lives. If members of the Feminist Club do not see issues of gender inequality in our building, it seemed unlikely that the general population would perceive there to be a problem. And yet, sexism and heterosexism exist in our schools and in our classrooms. How do we, as teachers committed to challenging sexism and heterosexism, address a problem our students do not perceive as existing? Our plan to partner with student groups was more complex than a simple request of “Tell us what you would like us to do!”

Reflections on Queering Feminist Facilitation

In this cycle, where we moved from problem posing to problem solving, my role as facilitator also shifted. As the participants engaged in problem solving, they gained more agency, confidence, and direction. They did not need me to act as a guide. In our February session, we came up with several ways to move beyond our circle and into engagement with our school community. The most fruitful of the ideas we pursued was reaching out to work with student clubs like the Feminist Club (described in the previous section). The last homework assignment I gave the group was to watch Gadsby's (2018) Netflix special, "Nanette." The group also discussed creating and circulating a survey for students to respond to anonymously that would gather data on their views of gender and sexuality. Some participants wanted to focus on student athletes and coaches specifically because they had "heard some pretty bad things about their toxic culture" (Meeting Notes, 10 February 2020). The idea for the survey was popular amongst the participants but made me nervous. I admitted my fears and questions in my Researcher's Journal:

I found myself almost taken aback by their thinking BIG. I want action too but I also want us to dialogue. Is it wrong to just want us to focus on our own conversations? Why did it make me nervous? . . . I think I'm thinking like a researcher a bit more than I am as a teacher or even as an activist. That's an interesting development for me. I have to wear that hat at the same time as these other ones, and I think it makes me more cautious about the direction this group takes. . . . Aren't I the activist? Don't I want to see this group get something real and tangible done? Why am I holding back? (Researcher's Journal, 10 February 2020)

My response to the participants exploring big ideas and bold actions surprised me. My perception of myself as an activist was challenged. Of course, feeling challenged is not only deconstructive but productive as well when viewed through a queer lens. de Lauretis (1991) explained, “Queer theory’s productivity lies in this double impulse of production and deconstruction, in its “both . . . and” structure. Queer theory antagonizes identity while at the same time claiming in your face visibility” (p. 146). I was certainly feeling antagonized. But why? Why did I want to keep focusing on dialogue? Was I feeling like I was no longer in control—something I thought I did not even want to be? I questioned myself. I needed to reflect on why I was feeling apprehensive. Turning dialogue into action was, theoretically, what I wanted and hoped and planned and expected for this group to do. Dialogue was the space where we could dig into our own experiences and examine our practices. I associated our dialogic community with intimacy, vulnerability, and community building. It was insular and protected. It was safe. After all, all of my educational heroes lauded dialogue as the crux to critical pedagogy and transformation (Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 1994; Souto-Manning, 2010). Though, hooks (2015) also critiqued the consciousness-raising groups of the second wave of the feminist movement as they “often became settings where women simply unleashed pent-up hostility and rage about being victimized, with little or no focus on strategies of intervention and transformation” (p. 7). While hooks (2015) recognized the criticality of engaged dialogue as key in women “confront[ing] their internalized sexism” (p. 10), she also saw it as a step in the process of revolution, which requires conversion, strategy, and action. Whether or not our group had fully confronted our own sexism and heterosexism, I was not sure. Maybe this was part of my hesitance. But the group was ready to take action. Who was I to demand more dialogue?

I noted the different hats I wore at different times and at overlapping times. I had wanted to take off the researcher/facilitator hat for so long but as the opportunity naturally arose, I felt “cautious.” Specifically, the idea about distributing a survey raised my concern as a researcher. My work in the academic setting led me to ask questions like, “What is our responsibility?” (Researcher’s Journal, 10 February 2020). I worried about the need for a survey to be developed carefully, and then to be reviewed and approved by our administration and likely the Board of Education. To me, it seemed like a huge undertaking that required ethical consideration. To the group, it seemed like a quick way to gather data. In part, I did not understand the desire to collect data on students’ attitudes about gender and sexuality. Didn’t we already have an idea how they felt? What would we do with the data? We have GLSEN’s National School Climate Survey (2018). We know how bad it is. Then again, maybe *we* didn’t. We had not looked at GLSEN’s report together as a group. Maybe this was a place to bring the data that already existed. I did not suggest GLSEN; I did pose the question: “Do any similar surveys already exist?” (Meeting Notes, 10 February 2020). Both my concern for procedure and ethical considerations in creating a survey and their concern for gathering data seemed influenced by internalized patriarchy and authoritarianism. Data has weight and credibility. We would use them to give ourselves and our work clout. Of course, viewing data as only a Likert Scale survey of a large group is a narrow conception: data can also be the stories from our classrooms, the stories of our students, and the stories of other teachers.

In my journal, I asked, “How is queer theory pushing me to disrupt my notions of collaboration and leadership and self-study?” (Researcher’s Journal, 23 January 2020). I gave no answer or explanation. It was on my mind but I was at a loss as to how to describe how queer theory was working for me or how I was using it in specific, concrete ways. I did not have a

checklist (I still don't). Instead, I wandered around in the weeds wondering if I should make my way back to a familiar trail or if I should see what I could discover if I continued on without a map. I just kept returning to the questions: How am I using queer theory? How am I disrupting my practice? Murray and Kalayji (2018) described queer pedagogy in this space of in between: "doing imperfectly with a view to someday doing better but inevitably never quite right (p. 17). This description of imperfection felt fitting for my facilitation and for our work together. As we problem-posed, we did so imperfectly but with focus always on "someday doing better."

Cycle 4: Action and Activism

What happens when a global pandemic interrupts everything? Our school moved to all remote, virtual learning on 13 March 2020—just days after our March meeting. This disruption altered our group's trajectory. First, the small group who planned to meet with the GSA the week after our March meeting was unable to do so. Though, I'm not sure anyone noticed. COVID-19 shifted all of our priorities. Along with the rest of the world, we had to triage. I assumed that discussing gender and sexuality would no longer be a top concern of my colleagues as we attempted to navigate the completely uncharted territory of remote learning under rules and regulations that were ever-changing. I focused my priorities on rewriting lessons and co-planning with Charlie for our 10th grade American literature course. Charlie worried about our students who needed more assistance and how we would be able to support them virtually. Suddenly, our jobs looked and felt very different, unfamiliar, and challenging.

Critical Incidents: A Global Pandemic and the Movement for Black Lives

For eight weeks, we did not meet as a PLC. We quarantined. We hibernated. We became experts at Google Meets. We found new methods of self care. I walked. And walked. And walked. I took new routes every day and explored every inch of my town. I listened to

audiobooks. I cried my way through Laymon's *Heavy* (2018) and every novel by Jane Austen. I stayed up late and slept late. And I worried about what to do with the PLC. Should I keep it going? Would it be another burden on top of a thousand other new burdens? Would the participants lose interest? I didn't know what to do, so I asked my advisor. Monica suggested that I reach out and ask. So, I posted in our Google Classroom:

Hi friends! How is everyone doing? How is distance learning going for you? Is anyone interested in doing a Google Hangout happy hour? I was thinking that we could shift our PLC into a sort of check-in space. . . Doesn't have to focus on gender—just could be a way to continue our community. Let me know your thoughts. (Google Classroom Post, 29 April 2020)

The same day, five PLC members posted comments:

Michelle: I'd love to! And hope you are all doing well.

Liz: That sounds fun. Hope you are all doing well. Thanks for reaching out.

Mary: I would like that very much!

Antoinette: I'm in!!!

Grace: I'd love to! (Google Classroom Post, 29 April 2020)

And so, our community continued. We held our virtual happy hour on 14 May 2020 where eight of us met on a Google Meet after school. I chose not to record the session: I hoped it would be an informal way to reconnect. We discussed book recommendations and TV shows to binge watch (e.g. *Glow*, *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel* and *Watchmen*). We laughed and told stories and commiserated together about the struggles of teaching remotely. We decided to continue our PLC meetings virtually. In my journal that day, I reflected:

At one point, I asked, “What’s everyone doing to keep sane?” After a momentary pause, several said something along the lines of “Sanity? What’s that?” But actual answers included yoga, walks, audiobooks, bike rides, etc. Mary is knitting and even has a spinning wheel now! Compared to our classroom meetings, I felt a little less pressure to host and be in charge, even though I still tried to throw out a few questions when a lull came. There wasn’t much need . . . After a day full of Zooms and Meets with my advisor and my dept and my classes, I was worried this was also going to feel exhausting and like an obligation. But it was really fun and it left me feeling in good spirits. But now, I must go on a walk. It’s a beautiful day, and I’ve spent too much time in front of a screen already. (Researcher’s Journal, 14 May 2020)

I worried unnecessarily. Our meeting was not a burden. In fact, it was rejuvenating. Our reunion lifted my spirits. Communities and connections—as many of us rediscovered during the spring of 2020—are crucial components to our well-being. The imposed quarantine was a disruption that led to transformation and boundary breaking. Boundaries were broken for all of us by necessity: personal space crossed into professional space as teachers, students, and parents attempted to fashion a new form of school from our homes.

As our tiny community came back together, and we settled into the routine of teaching in virtual spaces, our broader national community experienced repeated trauma when on 23 February 2020 Ahmaud Arbery was murdered while on a run, on 13 March 2020 Breonna Taylor was murdered in her bed, and on 25 May 2020, George Floyd was murdered in public, mid-day, by members of the Minneapolis Police Department. The civil unrest that followed galvanized and unified much of the country to support the Movement for Black Lives (Parker et al., 2020). Finally, it seemed, more people were discussing race/racism and finding ways to participate in

activism. For our group, this time also marked a new cycle: action, activism, and collaboration. We were physically separated but we used our virtual connections and Google platform tools to connect and collaborate.

Collaborative Writing

In this cycle, we made new use of a familiar form of collaboration: co-writing through shared Google Docs. Jacobi and Becker (2013) referred to a similar collaborative writing practice in their work with confined writers as “hybrid writing,” which they argued attempted “to queer the boundaries and power dynamics” (p. 39). Co-writing, or hybrid writing, disrupts the boundaries of authorship and ownership of words and ideas. Co-writing required communication, sharing, and flexibility.

In our previous sessions, I had shared a document containing notes, agenda items, and ideas. In our face-to-face sessions, these documents were mainly used to keep a record of what we discussed for participants who missed a session. I shared the document with each group member giving them edit access in a shared folder. However, I was the primary notekeeper. This practice shifted once we were in a virtual setting: shared documents played a more important role in our group moving from problem posing to action. We used our Google Classroom thread as a space to pose questions and problems—much in the way our in-person sessions had. Using the thread, we were able to pose questions and scenarios to the group at any time rather than waiting for a session. The post and comments offered a place to gather feedback before responding to students, supervisors, and administrators. For instance, I posted one such request to the group when I received an email from a student challenging a project I had assigned to celebrate PRIDE month. I planned for our American literature class to watch two short videos: one introduced the history of the Stonewall riots and the other compiled interviews with LGBTQ+ youth. After

reading some further interviews with LGBTQ+ activists and figures, they would conduct their own short interview (not necessarily with a person in the queer community). In our Google Classroom I posted, “Could use a bit of help here. I just received an email from a student who thinks I am "forcing" him to learn about LGBTQ people” (GC Post, 12 June 2020). Attached to the post, I shared a Google Doc with a copy of the student’s email, along with a draft of my response and a brief description of the project. The student, a white, cisgender male, stated in his email that learning about the LGBTQ+ community does not matter to most students, that it was unfair, and that he did not think I should be forcing them into it. He added that he perceived this type of material to be a bias of our entire school district, which he perceives as being liberal. In this student’s class, I knew there were two students who were not out to their peers: one who identified as gay and one who identified as gender nonconforming.

Within a couple of hours, Liz, Paige, Rebecca, Michelle, Antoinette, and Mary had left suggestions. Antoinette, a teacher in her first year at our school who identifies as gay, responded:

If this was mentioned in front of other students or if students have seen this, I think it could be helpful to speak with them about it too. We don’t know who identifies as LGBTQ or who has friends and family who do. This kind of comment hurts my feelings, and I’m an ADULT. I can only imagine how someone in their formative years might feel after reading this. (Shared Doc, 12 June 2020).

Antoinette’s response highlighted a fear of my own. Thankfully, the student had not spoken in front of his classmates, but his dismissal of the project seemed apparent enough during the class period. I worried for the two students I knew who were in the queer community and for those who I did not know. Paige added:

I think Antoinette makes a really good point. Also, you can mention that there may be people in their classes or community who identify as LGBTQ but not openly and it's important to understand all people[.] Having a better understanding of communities is important, whether it's race, sexuality, disability, etc. (Shared Doc, 12 June 2020).

Both Antoinette and Paige considered the other students in the classroom. They challenged the heteronormative assumption that everyone in the room is heterosexual. How do teachers challenge the assumptions of heterosexuality and heteronormativity in our classrooms? When a student expresses a prejudiced point of view, it can retraumatize other students in the classroom: something I want to be careful not to reproduce (Murray & Kalayji, 2018). Having received this student's response as an email instead of a comment stated in front of his classmates meant that other students were not subjected to hearing his view that most students do not need to learn about LGBTQ+ people or history. That said, I took Antoinette and Paige's remarks as an important reminder that I should reiterate with the whole class why it is important for all students, regardless of their gender or sexual identity, to learn about the queer community.

Liz considered tone and strategic rhetorical maneuvers to address this particular student. She posed the following possible approach: "I might even start with a compliment - 'I'm so glad you asked this question. Having clarity on why we talk about these issues is so important, and I'm happy to work with you so you have a better understanding.'" (Shared Doc, 12 June 2020). I responded, "You are way nicer than me :)" (Shared Doc, 12 June 2020). Liz followed up with her reasoning: "I'm actually trying to be sneaky rather than nice - lure the student in with a compliment so the student keeps reading. In other words, how do we get an unwilling participant to the table?" (Shared Doc, 12 June 2020). Liz offered a strategic approach that was different from my initial response: one of the benefits of collaborating on praxis is the exposure to

different methodology and reasoning. Her question about bringing “unwilling participants to the table” also brought up an important point to consider: to what extent do we attempt to meet students where they are? What if where they are is a place of prejudice? Clark (2010) grappled with these questions in her own practice as a teacher educator who continually revised her course in order to reach more resistant students and those she defined as “neutral.” Her conclusion was not to be more covert but to be more explicit:

I have named my commitments much more clearly. I have required students to participate in activities that will expose them more directly to LGBT people and their issues and that will force them to address their own homophobia and heterosexism. I know that this has made me unpopular with some of my students (and adversely, perhaps more popular with others). . . . I am not neutral on these issues—and my students know it. (p. 53)

Like Clark, my approach trended toward increasing my students’ exposure to reading, viewing, and reflecting that directly dealt with LGBTQ+ people, events, and themes. I want all of my students to reject homophobia and to defend the rights of people who identify as LGBTQ+ but I want to be clear about why. I felt Liz’s suggested response would feel ingenuine. I was *not* happy the student questioned why he needed to learn about people in the LGBTQ+ community. I was sad, disheartened, and frustrated. By Clark’s (2010) definition, Liz’s suggestion might fall under the “anti” category (rather than neutral or ally): this intermediary stage towards allyship is marked by a recognition of privilege and oppression but a hesitancy or ambivalence toward combating them directly. She described herself in this stage: “My responses were aimed at maintaining my position as a good, nice, well-liked professor who, while committed to issues of social justice, did not push students too hard” (p. 50).

In our circle, we had a range of responses and levels of commitment to how directly we named, called out, disrupted, and fought homophobia and heterosexism. Our dialogue, whether in person, virtual, or in comment threads, challenged all of us to consider what we do and why we do it. This particular exchange was not unlike the storytelling we shared in cycle 2. Rather than wait to share my experience at an official session where I might recap the actions I had already taken, posting to Google Classroom and using shared docs offered a more immediate way to address the issue together. This blurred the lines of our group's boundary: our support for one another was not bound and confined by meeting sessions on particular days and times (Britzman, 1998; DePalma & Atkinson, 2009, 2010). It also continued to blur my boundaries of myself as participant and researcher: I was another teacher and PLC member in need of advice and not the leader or facilitator who held answers and suggestions for others (Kumashiro, 2002).

Acknowledging Student Protest and Leadership

On 7 June 2020, Charlie, Rebecca, Joan, and I attended a march for Black lives in the town where we teach. The march was organized by a group of current students and recent alumnx, led primarily by two Black female seniors. The march included a local politician running for the House of Representatives, leaders from a local Black organization, a local rabbi, and members of our Board of Education, including the superintendent, and several student speakers. It was the first time most of us had seen each other in person since the schools closed in March. In masks, and holding signs, we marched in solidarity with our Black students and with all Black students, teachers, administrators, and people. The leaders of this peaceful and well-organized event should have been praised for their courage and leadership. Instead, the next day's announcements email from our high school's principal gave a temperate nod to the students' good behavior before correcting one of the student leaders on her statistics about the

school district's racial make-up. He closed with "I do take these things personally" (Principal's Email, 8 June 2020). Initially, I wrote an individual email expressing my outrage. Our principal did not respond. When I followed up to inquire about a response he responded with a curt message: "Did you ask a question?" (Email Correspondence, 15 June 2020). My anger wanted to respond immediately. But I paused. I decided to take my anger to the group for their feedback, support, and advice. First, I posted on our Google Classroom thread sharing my original email and asking for advice. Several members of the group responded with words of support. Joan commented, "Mad props, Kelly. I entirely agree with you and I am so grateful for this work that you have done. . . . I'd like to contribute to a collective action or email with others who feel the same way" (GC Comment, 11 June 2020). Grace agreed, "Ditto. I am in for collective action and email" (GC Comment, 11 June 2020). Tyler and Veronica added support for the student activists: Tyler replied, "Those students showed real moral [sic] and deserve the support of their school" (GC Comment, 11 June 2020). Veronica echoed this sentiment: "The students deserve support and recognition" (GC Comment, 11 June 2020). We closed the post with several of us agreeing to meet at our neighboring town's upcoming march: "Educators for Black Lives" (15 June 2020), where Mary, Veronica, Paige, and I marched together.

Over the next couple of days, Liz, Grace, and Mary left me comments on a shared Google doc I created to help formulate my next email response. Then, at our 17 June 2020 virtual meeting, we discussed the email exchanges and the implications for our social justice work:

Kelly: So, at the bottom, I have the start of my response. . . . And I did talk to [English Department Chair], too, about it. . . . She was like, "You can continue on as you are, or wait a couple of weeks if you want to open a real dialogue." Although, I

think, that I'll leave it to this group. And I'll just—I don't want to wait two weeks to respond. Like, I feel like I need to respond to this sooner rather than later. . . .

Joan: I feel like his email—the “Did you ask a question?”—I think is a huge middle finger. My interpretation of that is he is absolutely, pardon my French, telling you to “f— off.” I don't, I'm not sure if you guys read it the same way. Like, wow. . . .

Paige: It's so dismissive. . . Any time someone speaks up regarding any type of social justice issue, it's just blown off.

Mary: I think, even if you are as generous can be, and say, . . . “It was a mistake,” It's not acceptable. Even if he's not being intentionally malicious about it. Like, as a leader, there's still a responsibility to substantively address these things. . . .

Charlie: And now it's between him and us, you know, not just you. All of us. . . .

Tyler: I think we're in a position to—I mean, granted I guess everyone's in a position to make a difference—but I think we're in a position, in an influential place, to actually make a difference. (Transcript 10, 17 June 2020)

In attempting to act on my own, I felt angry, defeated, silenced, and ignored. Sharing with our circle, I felt supported, acknowledged, encouraged, and empowered. Though I still was not heading to the group *first*, I was learning to lean on them and to recognize the gravity of their counsel, their support, and our collective power. Together, we interrogated our expectations for the building leadership. Paige noted that the email I received was indicative of a larger problem: the dismissal of all individuals who attempt to bring up issues of social justice. Joan interpreted the email as an aggressive shut down of my frustration with how the Black female student leaders were treated. Still, Joan allowed room for other interpretations. Mary offered a compelling response: even if we do not view it as intentionally dismissive, his private response

to me and his public response about the march were still unacceptable. We all expected our building leadership to support the young women who showed courage, leadership, initiative, and commitment as they led a March and spoke their stories to their peers and community members. Charlie's response reminded me that I am no longer a rogue, loner, radical screaming into the email abyss in vain. She emphasized: this is about *us*. Tyler also cited our work as a group and focused even more so on our collective power and ability to affect change. As a group, we were recognizing our potential for influence, despite an administration that was, at best, ambivalent; at worst, silencing.

We held up some familiar binaries in this dialogue: us versus him and teachers versus administrators. We disrupted boundaries, too. Calling out an administrator for not responding adequately in a public email was a disruption to the usual deference to authority. Sharing a personal email correspondence with the principal may have violated some unspoken standards of privacy, opening up the boundaries of what is ours to dissect and discuss. Inviting the group to help collaborate on my email response disrupted ideas of authorship. While I sent an email with my signature, it had been co-authored by several people. The co-authored final email read:

[Principal]

I am so sorry my questions were not more transparent.

Here are questions to begin our dialogue:

- What steps are we taking to address racial disparity in [leveling]?
- What steps are we taking to address the racial disparity in detentions/punishments/suspensions of students of color?
- What steps are we taking to move to restorative justice rather than punitive justice? Can we have district training in restorative practices?

- Can we devote PD time next fall to teacher-led anti-bias and anti-racism training for all HS staff members?
- What work is being done to include black and LGBTQ+ voices and history in the curricula such that they are neither tokenized or victimized in their presentation/incorporation?
- How will our administrators support the faculty in social justice initiatives and curricula?
- What are our building administrators currently reading, viewing, listening to on the subject of social justice and anti-racism? (e.g. *White Fragility*, *How to Be an Anti-Racist*, *So You Wanna Talk about Race? 1619*, *13th*, etc.)

I think this is a vital conversation for us to have as a faculty. It is a national (and global) conversation, and we would be remiss in not engaging in it fully and immediately.

Thank you,

Kelly

The response to this email was sent by one of the assistant principals; the only woman on our administrative team who has been in our district for one year. She provided a detailed account of her background in social justice work at other school districts. She closed the email by saying, “I would like to dialogue with you privately about some of the assumptions inherent in the questions you asked to the administration en masse. Let me know when you are available to speak” (Email, 23 June 2020). Though we did set up a meeting and moved the date more than once, she eventually cancelled. Our next co-authored email was sent as a collective. It received a warmer reception.

Acknowledging Juneteenth

Throughout June, our energy was high. As we dabbled in ways to take actions, we faced the close of a school year that was fast approaching. In our June session, we engaged in another co-writing collaboration. Liz posted in our Google Classroom site the following request:

Hi, all! I posted this question to be a place for us to brainstorm ideas. Juneteenth is on Friday. What ideas could we share with the administration on how this day could be acknowledged virtually in a productive, enlightening way for the school community?

What resources could be shared with those who want to learn more? (Google Classroom Post, 16 June 2020)

Eight participants commented their support for taking this action together. We decided to open a Google Doc to share some resources related to Juneteenth. The following day, we had a scheduled virtual session. During a portion of that time, we discussed which resource to share, a “quote of the day” (for our principal who sends out a quote of the day with each morning announcement email), and how to best word our email requesting the administration publicly recognize Juneteenth. Before co-writing the email, we had the following dialogue:

Charlie: Do you mean sending out an email, like having the administration recognize it?

Rebecca: I mean, I’m not one with the words. I feel very, I mean, I would bug out.

Kelly: (Laughing) Um. Well, that can be a co-written thing.

Charlie: Yeah.

Veronica: Could we send it from our group, from our PLC as we are all like, you know, people who care about this? And that way it’s not tied to one person’s name. I’m a new teacher, and I don’t want to be going against [the principal], really, at this point. So, like, you know—

Rebecca: Yeah, I—

Veronica: But I also think it's important. So, there's a lot of us in the group. And maybe it like almost shows more backing that way. You know, we're all kind of in on this.

In deciding to co-write this email, Veronica voiced concern about being perceived as “going against” the administration. She felt safer being part of a group, rather than standing alone as an untenured, new teacher. She also noted the power embedded in numbers, the same kind of collective power that unions offer to workers. Collective action provided safety, power, and solidarity. Mary drafted a response while we offered suggestions and asked questions about word choice. Mary assured the group: “And I don't feel any proprietariness over this, so if people want to chop and edit and revise, please do so” (Transcript 10, 17 June 2020). Charlie encouraged Mary's first draft: “That's beautiful Mary. That would have taken me like 4 hours to write that” (Transcript 10, 17 June 2020). We discussed the phrasing of a few key words. For example, in this exchange:

Joan: —like, “as you know.” Yeah.

Charlie: Would: “Appreciate if you included?”—I don't know.

Joan: “Think it could be really meaningful”—I don't know. Is that too, that's way too Canadian? Like, “It'd be really nice!” Also, I'm Canadian, that's why I said that. But. Okay. “Ask that you include”—

Mary: Yeah, because, I think, one of the things about, like, like, I hear what folks are saying about needing to not alienate administrators and folks but I also think that there's power in being like, “This is something that we want, and it's not that big

of a deal. So, please do it.” Um. Which is also I think sort of one of the options to consider here.

As we debated the word choices and tone of our email, Mary voiced an important counterargument that challenged our perceptions of power and authority. As we discussed wording, the fear of “alienating administrators” fueled much of the language. When Mary offered this point of view, we went back through the email and deleted several lines and phrases that qualified our statements and attempted to placate our administrator out of a preemptive fear that he would take offense to our request. Mary reminded us: our request was reasonable and important. The final email to our building principal read:

As you know, this Friday the 19th is Juneteenth, the celebration of the emancipation of enslaved people in the U.S. We, members of the Social Justice PLC, ask that you include an acknowledgment of this holiday in your morning announcements email on Friday, if you don’t already have something planned. Here is a small blurb we wrote about the holiday and a link to a resource (article/video) that might be helpful to include:

Today we are celebrating Juneteenth, the holiday which commemorates the emancipation of enslaved peoples in the U.S. For many members of the African-American community, this holiday is viewed as “Independence Day,” since the Declaration of Independence, commemorated on July 4th, explicitly did not include enslaved people in its scope. We encourage you to check out the following video.

Here is a potential Quote of the Day: “It takes deep commitment to change and ever deeper commitment to grow.” - Ralph Ellison

Signed,

Veronica, Joan, Sara, Rebecca, Paige, Charlie, Kelly, Liz, Dale, Tyler, Grace, and Mary, twelve members of the PLC, signed their names. The three who did not were non-tenured teachers, each finishing their first year with the district. This simple email was a small action in the scope of the activism that is necessary to make transformational change in a school community. But, for our group, it was a unifying act that strengthened our community bond and solidified our commitment to the work. The process of writing and revising and discussing language together also engaged us in a discussion of our concerns, fears, values, and priorities.

Claiming and Reclaiming: Naming Ourselves

St. Pierre (2000) said, “We word the world” (p. 483). To name ourselves was to construct *and* deconstruct who we were and what we were doing. Our group, which was a professional learning community by necessity (we were fulfilling a requirement of our school district) began to refer to ourselves as “the PLC” or “our PLC,” though we were all part of multiple PLCs. This name was an informal and vague designation but it helped us communicate and reference ourselves as a collective entity (e.g. Should I post this in the PLC? Is the PLC meeting today? We should talk about this with the PLC.). Our focus, for the first year of our community, was to discuss gender and sexuality, but what brought us together was a broader concern for issues related to social justice. Early on, we discussed the struggle to be both intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989) and not limiting in our discussions while also focusing our discussions on specific subtopics to have more depth and clarity. In our first meeting, Mary stated:

I’m wondering. . . acknowledging that intersectionality is real and important, if we want to pick a silo to sort of focus on first. Like, do we want to start with gender? Do we want to start with sexuality? Or do we want to sort of start somewhere, instead of—I don’t

know, I'm feeling a little overwhelmed by all of the potential topics (Transcript 1, 7 October 2019).

With this concern echoed by Rebecca, we decided as a group to focus first on gender and to, for a time, put off topics related to sexuality, race/racism, and other issues related to social justice. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many other unarmed Black Americans, was a catalyst for our group to refocus and reprioritize our topics. The civil unrest of the spring and summer of 2020 also lead to a critical conversation about what we wanted our group's name to be. The discussion arose in our 10th session when we co-wrote our first email to the administration. How should we sign it: with a name for our group or with the list of our individual names? In discussion, we had the following exchange:

Rebecca: I think it should just be Social Justice. Period. Full stop.

Veronica: I think that's the name, right there.

Tyler: I think, with our current climate, teachers in our school are just like people in society. Some of them may have been hesitant to join, and now, it's sad to say, but the 'in thing' and we may actually have a big jump in people interested. You know?

Kelly: Right.

Veronica: And administration should want a group like this to exist. It looks good for the school. It looks good for, in general, for them P.R. wise, at least. It shouldn't be the only reasoning. But, you know? (laughing). If we name ourselves—and I think 'Social Justice' is a really good way to be about it—because that's really what we're kind of going after. It almost adds some credibility, and like puts some

ownership on them. Like, “Look. This group that really should exist, exists, and is asking you to do this.” . . .

Paige: I don’t know if “Social Justice” will like not—will that freak people out? You know how people want to get involved but “Social Justice” sounds like so much maybe. Like, I don’t know if we want to also consider options like . . . “Diversity and Equity” because it’s not just diversity, it’s also equity. Like, Diversity and Equity education. But if that strays too far from the original purpose of the group, we can totally scrap that.

Joan: I like that.

Kelly: I would argue for “Social Justice” over “Diversity & Equity” for a couple of reasons. One because our initiative as a district is “social justice,” and people need to get on board with that. And two—my two is a hesitation—um, I hesitate to be like, “Anyone who is interested in just being tolerant of others, come join”—I want to be activist. I want to like push and challenge and disrupt shit. So, that—(laughing)—But I understand I’m a little more on that radical line than a lot of other people are. . . .

Joan: I don’t know how much this should matter even when I think about it, but I definitely think the phrase “Social Justice Warrior” is used against us to discredit everything that we’re doing. So, I don’t know if that’s a phrase we want to like not care about and try to get people to think about “Social Justice” differently. But I know that people use that, students use that, to dismiss somebody. . . .

Veronica: We seem to be an activist group. I don’t know another way of saying it. So, if that is our mission, we should label it and name it as such. I know the goal is to

bring on—bring on board more people to our side but also, you know, toning down our—I don’t know how to put this—but we shouldn’t be losing ourselves for a name. . . .

Paige: I don’t know. I think you guys have raised good points. Especially, what Veronica said: why diminish what we’re seeking to do just to kind of acquiesce and make ourselves more palatable? (Transcript 10, 17 June 2020).

In the process of naming ourselves, we were also naming our community’s identity, our values, and our mission. From this moment, we referred to ourselves as the Social Justice PLC. In coming to our new name, we prioritized our commitment to activism over the desire to be “palatable,” as Paige said, in order to attract more members. We came to this decision as a community through an open dialogue with differing viewpoints expressed. Rebecca, Veronica, Tyler, and I supported the name “Social Justice.” Veronica and I were the most adamant about this choice and in identifying as activists. On the other hand, Paige and Joan expressed concerns about the way the phrase “social justice” is received and wielded as derogatory. Paige, who was new to joining our group, was the most hesitant. Paige worried that the name “social justice” could “freak people out.” Joan reiterated this concern noting that the phrase “social justice warrior” has been used to “discredit” and “dismiss” people. The concerns voiced by Paige and Joan focus less on their own dislike for the phrase or the work of social justice and more for the perception and narrative that has been attached to the phrase. Both Joan and Paige felt committed to the work of social justice but when it came to identifying with the phrase, they held reservations. The term, *social justice warrior*, or the more widely used acronym, SJW, has often been used as a pejorative to discredit socially progressive people, especially feminists. Massanari and Chess (2018) defined the insult: “The ‘SJW’ is a humorless shrill who takes pleasure in

demonstrating their superiority by policing the behavior of others” (p. 526). They likened this depiction to the Ahmed’s (2010) description of the “feminist killjoy.” Both insults, rooted in misogyny and sexism, attempt to weaken the power and influence of the targeted person. Massanari and Chess (2018) contrasted the abbreviation “SJW,” with the full phrase: “the nonabbreviated phrase embodies a positive connotation: Perhaps calling to mind the image of an Amazonian fighter, feminized yet deployed for martial labor” (p. 526). In taking back such a phrase, we could disrupt and challenge the narrative and, thus, the power dynamic. Reclaiming language has often been an empowering act of self-identification: women who reclaimed “bitch,” members of the LGBTQ+ community who reclaimed “queer,” and Black people who reclaimed the “n” word, all engaged in a disruption of language by reconstructing, reappropriating, and reframing derogatory slurs.

Women and girls are socialized to please and be demure (Chemaly, 2018; Gilligan, 1982, Mohr, 2015), which might be one way to interpret Paige and Joan’s concern of how others might respond to the name “social justice.” In their language choices, they take less assertive positions in their stance by using the phrase “I don’t know”: Paige said, “I don’t know if we want to also consider—” and Joan added, “I don’t know how much this should matter—”. This phrasing possibly undermined their ideas, a common way women give up power in conversation (Mohr, 2015). Paige also offered an alternative name: “Diversity & Equity.” But she concluded her suggestion with a qualification: “If that strays too far from the group’s original purpose, we can scrap that.” Should her qualification be viewed as capitulation? Is it gendered? Is it a submission because she was a new member to the group? Or should Paige’s statements be viewed as cooperative? Are these language choices a careful tread of non-confrontation? In a similar way, at the close of my response, I used self-deprecation by describing myself as, “a little more on that

radical line.” This statement served to balance the assertive position I had just taken: “I want to, like push and challenge and disrupt shit.” Paige, Joan, and I all used qualifiers to soften our opinions and defer to the group’s perspective. We were being polite and agreeable group members. These language choices could also be interpreted as signaling a position of solidarity and a shared priority of valuing the community over the individual. Even as we expressed differing points of view, we signaled to one another that we were still on the same side. DePalma and Atkinson (2009) suggested the value of building a community with “dissensus, rather than consensus” as it acts as “the starting point for action” (p. 840). There is value inherent in a community drawing from a diverse set of perspectives (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Veronica’s description of us as an activist group and her conclusion that “we shouldn’t be losing ourselves for a name” convinced Paige to reconsider and question her stance. Paige reframed the problem for herself by asking, “why diminish what we’re seeking to do just to kind of acquiesce and make ourselves more palatable?” In posing this question, Paige decreased the value of being palatable to others and repositioned the group and our mission as more important. She noted that to be more palatable to others would in essence, “diminish” our work; it would lessen our power and effectiveness. Filax (2006) emphasized, “an impetus for queer research is for social change” (p. 139). Filax promoted the use of queer theory with action research: “action research informed by queer theory makes it possible for participants to interrogate their own identifications and, as importantly, the significance of these identifications to social hierarchies of oppression” (p. 144). In our discussion of choosing our name, we engaged in this type of self-interrogation about how we identify ourselves. Though, we only began to interrogate the social hierarchies and systems within which we operate, we still viewed our administrators as authority figures with the unquestioned power to reject or accept our modest requests for social justice

action (e.g. simply recognizing Juneteenth as a significant holiday). Our reasons for committing to the name, Social Justice PLC, included both subverting norms and fulfilling them. Scott and Veronica both noted that the optics of social justice are “in” right now; thus, our group was good P.R. for the school and administration. My own response represented both a subversive and a conformist position: at once, I referred to a desire to “disrupt shit” but also referenced the district’s language choice of “social justice” as a reason to adopt the phrasing ourselves. Is it disruptive to meet your school district’s stated goal? Is it disruptive to do social justice when it is the popular thing to do at this moment? And yet, identifying explicitly as a social-justice oriented group felt like a risk and caused some discomfort. More importantly, it was a critical step in our commitment as social justice educators working to dismantle oppression in its many forms.

It is telling that when the world headed into quarantine, U.S. citizens also headed to the streets in protest and action. On a smaller (much smaller) scale, our group did something similar. About half of our group did head to the streets at least once: Charlie, Joan, Veronica, Mary, Paige, Rachel, and I met at two different marches for Black Lives. Though, our work as activists paled in comparison to what so many citizens took up in the spring and summer of 2020. We did not stand on the front lines with the #BlackLivesMatter protesters or the “Wall of Moms” in Portland. We did not paint or preserve protest murals in Minneapolis. We did not lead panels discussing whether or not to defund the police or how to enact abolitionist education in our schools (Love, 2019). Ours was a baby-step to activism. But it felt like we were making important leaps together: for ourselves and our context. We were no longer putting action off as something to be done when there’s more time, nor did we view activism as only a matter of our curricula (Picower, 2015).

Reflections on Queering Feminist Facilitation

I would like to say that by this point, I felt comfortable in my boundary-crossing role as participant/teacher and researcher/facilitator. But still, I struggled. I ruminated on the extent to which I should participate as vocally as the others. Should I hold back my opinion? As a teacher, I often reminded myself to hold my tongue so that students did not feel the need to take my position or to view my position as the correct one to hold. In our exchange about our name, I offered my support and reasoning for the phrase “Social Justice” to be included in our group’s official name. As I offered my opinion, I worried that the others would defer to me, as if my wants held more weight. But in this discussion, and at this point in our community’s process of becoming, I felt more like a participant than a leader. As a participant, I should be able to voice my perspective along with the others, but I should not force my perspective to be the prevailing one. Reflecting on when I entered the conversation, in the above exchange, Rebecca, Tyler, and Veronica had already voiced their support for using the phrase “social justice.” I did not introduce the phrase. However, I was the first to counter Paige’s concern after Joan supported her. Should I have held back and let others debate Paige’s point? I worried that countering her could feel like silencing, which might deter her from participating further with the group. In reflection a week later, Paige wrote:

It is reassuring to see that there's a core group of like-minded people in the building that want to see the same systemic changes that I do. It's interesting to hear the various approaches that people want to take since I don't think we're all completely on the same page, but the different perspectives make the conversations more fruitful and the actions we take more deliberate and balanced. I thought the discussion about naming the PLC

was thought provoking as language can be very important. (Optional Reflection, 24 June 2020)

Paige described our different perspectives in this conversation about our name as “fruitful,” “deliberate,” and “balanced.” Paige’s reflection heartened me. Being in a safe space does not require that we all agree with one another—in fact, dissent and dissonance provide important opportunities for queering our perceptions (hooks, 1994; Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009; Murray & Kalayji, 2018). Charlie agreed that we had built a safe environment: “It felt safe and allowed teachers to talk about hard/uncomfortable conversations or situations we had with our students. We were able to offer advice to each other and talk through real issues in our classrooms” (Optional Reflection, 24 June 2020). Liz offered, “I thought it was amazing to have an opportunity to talk through these difficult issues with peers in a low-stress environment” (Optional Reflection, 24 June 2020). Tyler’s response emphasized our shift in direction, commitment, and activism during the spring:

I believe that we were working on getting comfortable with discussing topics and dove a little into concerns of the school. However, after the George Floyd murder, we switch[ed] the focus to race and become more activist. I would like to continue to push myself into uncomfortable conversations so I can grow as a person and educator. (Optional Reflection, 24 June 2020)

Only four members chose to respond to the optional survey (sent out on the last day of school), but the four who did respond viewed the work of our group in affirmative ways. All four noted the role of discomfort in growth: Charlie and Tyler both referred to “uncomfortable conversations” and Liz described talking through “difficult issues.” Paige and Tyler both alluded

to dialogue leading to action or activism. My feelings reflecting on our recent turn to activism also went through a notable shift toward optimism:

This meeting was really energizing and heartening and productive. This support helps keep us focused on what we can do: what is possible and in our realm of control. This feeling is in stark contrast to my feelings from a few weeks ago when I was trying to take on the administration by myself via email. . . . When should I be acting on my own and when should I pause my individual actions in favor of conferring and planning as a group? I am seeing now that my individual responses are often not well-received by administration. Our responses as a group are taken more in stride. . . . it is more important for me to put the group more to the forefront of my mind and my priorities in deciding when and how to take actions. The work of this group is greater than my work as an individual and has the potential to make more concrete, transformational, and long-term changes in our district. This must be my priority. (Researcher's Journal, 19 July 2020)

At the start of our work together, I believed (in a theoretical kind of way) that working with others on anti-oppressive work would be easier and more effective. I had come to understand this more thoroughly through experience. Knowing with the head can never fully grasp what knowing with the heart can. Or maybe the heart confirms what the head knows and the head confirms what the heart knows. Or maybe we cannot separate humans into head and heart binaries that symbolize logic and emotion because we are both inextricably. In any case, I had come to confirm the following ideas for myself as a feminist teacher activist: a) collaborating with allies on social justice work made a difference in staying emotionally committed to difficult work; b) collaborating with allies provided a buffer of safety that protected individuals (me and

others) from administrator disapproval; and c) collaborating with allies might be slower work but it is often more effective work.

As a feminist teacher activist attempting to queer my facilitation of a collaborative group, I still had not come to any conclusions about what method of facilitation was best. Like Clark (2010), I had a strong desire to “get it right” (p. 52). My joy in the activism work was tempered by my continued confusion with the facilitation work. Looking back on my researcher’s journal, I wrote very little about facilitation during our period of activism. I had some small concerns during our debate about our name but for the most part, my reflections were much more focused on the emotional work of activism. I came back to thinking about facilitation after attending a virtual meeting with four alumnx from our district, two rising seniors in our high school, and one parent in the district (a teacher in another district who is a woman of color). The meeting was led by a former student of mine who is now a community activist. I reflected:

I was thinking about the way that Kashvi opened and closed our meeting: it was intentional and thoughtful. I am feeling like I have missed an opportunity doing something similar in our PLC sessions. At least to have opening/closing practices (rituals?) that are consistent across sessions. They used the word “grounding.” At the beginning, we introduced ourselves and something we recently read. At the end of the session, they brought us back by having each person say one thing they were going to do that came out of this session. I think that’s definitely something we could use in our PLC: what’s one thing you would like to do before our next PLC? Or even, what’s one take-away from this session?

I am worried that in my attempts to not lead, I have also not planned where I *could* have planned so that there is a sense of purpose, design, and intention to each of our meetings.

I am thinking about what kinds of questions we could have asked at each session (maybe one guiding question to start the session), giving the sessions a theme. (Researcher's Journal, 27 July 2020).

Participating in a dialogic community where I was decidedly not the facilitator reminded me of the possibilities for queering facilitation. I had struggled with the idea that queering facilitation meant *not* facilitating or, maybe more accurately, resisting facilitating. This same pitfall often challenges democratic educators who mistakenly believe that democratic teaching means not teaching (Dewey, 1938; hooks, 1994; Morley, 1998). Kashvi modeled a queer feminist facilitation that was intentional, planned, attentive, fluid, and anti-authoritarian. They challenged my perceptions—and my feelings—about facilitation. My former student became my teacher, facilitator, and model. Kashvi provided the group with an opportunity to share ourselves and to build community, an opportunity to “ground” ourselves by focusing our intentions on the same goal, and an opportunity to close with a commitment to action. It seemed so simple—and yet so revelatory. If I accepted that I was the facilitator of the group, how might that change the way I ran our meetings? How might that benefit the group? I was opening and closing each session already. If I viewed only these actions as my responsibility as facilitator, how could I approach them queerly? My resistance to accepting the position as facilitator was unsettling, while the model Kashvi offered was comforting. This unsettling, however, was both productive and queer. Resisting the role was a resistance to a boundary and a definition that engaged me in a cycle of critical self-reflection (Britzman, 1998; Kumashiro, 2002; Shlasko, 2005). It was not right, and it was not wrong. It was something in between.

CHAPTER 5: Conclusions and Implications

Conclusions

There is a colorful, short, three-panel comic strip entitled “Different” (Norris, 2016). In the first panel, a pink blob-like being stands in the middle of an orderly room with flowers on a table and plates neatly stacked on shelves. Mx. Blob says, “I want things to be different.” The middle panel depicts a chaotic scene where Mx. Blob, baseball bat in hand, is destroying everything around them. Flowers and broken pieces of vases and plates fly in midair. In the final panel, the being stands in the same room with scattered remnants around them. The being’s caption bubble remarks, “Oh no.” The comic, for me, depicts queering and researching—a disruption of the safe, orderly, normative, and seemingly in place. While the final panel appears messy, chaotic, disordered, it is also beautiful. It implies, “Well, what now? What does it all mean? Things are different, and I disrupted the norms: so, how do I make sense of what lies around me?” This is where I stand now—in the midst of chaos of my own creation.

Over the course of ten sessions across one school year, I had the opportunity to engage in dialogue and activism with a group of educators who were committed to discussing gender and sexuality and to working for social justice. In this chapter, I outline what I learned from this often messy, but also quite beautiful, process. The questions that guided my research were:

- What can be learned from a group of high school teachers engaged in a school-based culture circle addressing issues of gender and sexuality in our classrooms and school?
- How can I queer my feminist facilitation of a school-based culture circle?

I used queer theory to disrupt my notions of facilitation, and my notions of self as a feminist, a teacher, an activist, a participant, and a researcher. Queering facilitation was an entirely new practice for me, and I had no road map to follow. I did have piles of books and articles written by

critical, queer, and feminist scholars, pedagogues, and activists. But, as is usually the case, much of the learning and sense-making came from the experience. In this chapter, I first discuss what I learned in relation to building a feminist community focused on discussing gender and sexuality. Then, I share what I learned in attempting to queer my feminist facilitation of a professional learning community. Finally, I discuss implications for teachers and teacher educators interested in organizing and participating in similar dialogic and activist teacher groups. I must emphasize that our experience is particular to our unique place, context, and group. Similar groups in other contexts would likely have drastically different experiences. I have no rules to offer. I have more questions than answers. This, to me, is to queer: questions lead to questions; disrupting leads to disrupting. In setting out to queer her pedagogy, Whitlock (2010) described, “I am excited about the prospect of this course, but not because I wish to practice toward finding answers, but because I want to practice toward finding questions” (pp. 101–102). In the spirit of “practicing toward finding questions,” I disrupt my perception of what a conclusion should be. I offer my conclusions and recommendations but with the caveat that other readers may reasonably come to different conclusions and recommendations (Kumashiro, 2002).

Discussion of Building Feminist Communities to Discuss Gender & Sexuality

I expected to have more revelations about how a group of teachers tackles issues—particularly the oppressions—related to gender and sexuality in classrooms and schools (e.g. heteronormativity, homophobia, heterosexism, misogyny, misogynoir, etc.). What came out of this study was a clearer understanding of the importance of teachers having communities where they are able to discuss, share, problematize, reflect, plan, and take action on these, and other, social justice issues. The process of building a feminist community did not happen in a clean, linear, quick, step-by-step fashion. Our process was slow, tangled, circular, and meandering.

Going into this research, I knew that most feminist communities share some key traits: a democratic sharing of leadership, the inclusion of many voices, the centering of experiences and stories, and a commitment to taking action to affect social change (Forrest & Rosenberg, 1997). While I expected the need for vulnerability to be part of this community building, I was struck by how integral vulnerability was to *all* the layers of a feminist community (hooks, 2003/2019).

Our group, a professional learning community (PLC), came together because we shared a common interest in pursuing social justice. I suggested our first year in dialogue be spent examining gender and sexuality with the agreement that we would prioritize race and racism the following year. We agreed that intersectionality was key to our social justice commitments but having focal points would also help us delve deeper into particular oppressions. As an interdisciplinary group, we necessarily deprioritized the usual products of PLCs (assessments, activities, quizzes, unit plans, etc.). Instead, we valued dialogue, collective reflection, and action in iterative cycles. Together, we set the expectation that we would use this community space as a place to share with one another, to tackle issues we were facing, to open ourselves up to discomfort, and to try to change ourselves, our practices, and our broader school community. Several members had a sense that dialogue alone would be unsatisfying or frustrating: we wanted our dialogue to guide us into action. It is in this dialogue that members posed problems they were experiencing in their classrooms and in the school; then, as a group, we worked through the cycle of questioning, reflecting, problem solving, and taking action (Freire, 1970/2004; Souto-Manning, 2010).

Key to our dialogic sessions were the participants' willingness to be vulnerable in sharing their personal narratives. Our community was strengthened by focusing on our current experiences. Rather than address the abstract or hypothetical (though, those are also useful

practices in theorizing and deconstructing oppression), we addressed specific and current issues the participants were facing in their classrooms, which led to addressing the specific and current issues we were facing as a school community. Over time, the focus of our sessions evolved. They changed in tone, focus, and energy. Our problem posing and storytelling sessions from our earlier meetings focused on making space to hear a member's story. We listened. We supported. We encouraged. We grappled. We questioned. In our later sessions, as we shifted from problem posing to problem solving and taking action, our sessions became more energetic. This shift also coincided with the unexpected move from in-person to virtual learning in the midst of a global pandemic. We transitioned from meeting for 30 to 45 minutes in the same classroom after school to meeting for 2 to 3 hours on virtual Google Meets (despite my attempts to close meetings earlier). Our later sessions had multiple focuses and served many purposes: checking in with one another about our emotional well-being, commiserating about teaching remotely, discussing current protests and actions for Black Lives Matter, planning and strategizing how to respond to individual issues and school-wide issues, collaborating and co-writing responses to our students, our administrators, and our fellow faculty members. Together we found a collective voice. Finding our collective voice gave us strength, support, and confidence to take further actions. Of course, building a feminist community was challenging. It was especially challenging when we attempted to move beyond dialogue to attempting actions. We faced administrators who were confused and frustrated by our efforts to disrupt the status quo. We also faced our own fears, concerns, and hesitations.

Community Building through Vulnerability and Storytelling of Lived Experiences

To be vulnerable is to take risk. In the patriarchal setting, vulnerability is often mocked, repressed, demeaned, and dismissed. The traditional gender binary in the patriarchal system casts

men as rational beings and women as emotional beings. The rational is valued over the emotional; therefore, the ideas of men are valued over those of women (Butler, 2016; Forgasz & Clemans, 2014; Kuzmic, 2014; Lewis & Simon, 1986; Weiner, 2004). For teachers in conversation with one another in groups like professional learning communities, the “rational” is often an emphasis on looking at data, discussing outcomes, and prioritizing production, such as the creation of assessments (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). PLCs can be further twisted by top-down mandates, scrutiny, oversight, and micromanagement that reinforce the authoritarian and patriarchal structure. To counteract and disrupt this repressive and narrow version of “community” amongst colleagues, our group prioritized sharing our experiences through storytelling and practicing being vulnerable, as we deprioritized traditional PLC products like creating assignments and assessments (Copp & Kleinman, 2008; Harvey et al., 2016; Taylor & Coia, 2019).

“Be Brave and Take Heart” (Researcher’s Journal, 14 February, 2020):

Vulnerability as Risk-taking. The members of our circle who volunteered to share the issues they were experiencing related to gender and sexuality took risks by sharing what could be viewed as weaknesses in moments of pedagogical uncertainty (Coia & Taylor, 2013). Teachers are supposed to be experts. Novice teachers are often given the advice to “Fake it ‘til you make it” and “Don’t smile until December.” Even when we do not feel like experts, the pretense of expertise and seriousness is often promoted and expected. In sharing their stories to the group, the PLC members had to challenge this conditioning. They risked being judged or being perceived differently by their colleagues. Those who shared in our earlier sessions—Liz, Grace, Mary, and Rebecca—did so with little knowledge of how the group would react. Thus, their self-disclosure required a belief and faith in the members of the group to treat their stories with

empathy and care. Even though we had explicitly stated our expectations in the first session, the reality of how people would respond was yet unknown. Taylor and Coia (2006) described the need for both risk and trust in building their feminist collaboration:

We found the ways in which we care for each other, listen to one another, provide a space for vulnerability and for risk-taking as a strength, not a criticism. . . . It seems that for a collaboration, as with good teaching, there has to be risk and trust. It is in essence, a caring collaboration. (p. 63)

This relationship and balance between risk and trust is at the heart of a caring, feminist community that values vulnerability and members' voices. There is a paradox embedded in the process of constructing a safe and trusting community built on vulnerability and self-disclosure. For most, the willingness to be vulnerable is risky and first requires feelings of trust and safety in their audience. But it is through self-disclosure and vulnerability—and the community's responses to them—where that trust is built and reinforced (Gamelin, 2005; hooks, 1994; Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009; Taylor & Coia, 2006). In alignment with the expectations we agreed on during our first session, the group members listened attentively and then consistently responded with care, empathy, sympathy, support, and encouragement for the speaker. In reflection, I noted, "We take turns telling each other to be brave and take heart" (Researcher's Journal, 14 February, 2020). As much as the initial risk-taking of vulnerability is crucial to building a feminist space, our experience suggests that the community's response is also a crucial piece in embodying an ethic of care (Noddings, 1999; 2012). Our care for one another might have tempered responses and disagreements but it also created a space where more participants felt able to take risks and share their experiences. Which, in turn, provided moments for us to self-reflect, collectively reflect, question, and grow.

Drawing from Lived Experiences to Discuss Gender and Sexuality. The material for our sessions derived from the participants' lived experiences from our classrooms, our hallways, our department meetings, and our interactions with administrators. Dewey (1938), Freire (1970/2004), hooks (1994, 2003/2019), Coia and Taylor (2009, 2013), Ellsworth (1992), and many other critical pedagogues, have noted the powerful difference between learning experiences rooted in the learner's lived experiences and those that are abstract and distant from the learner's life. Souto-Manning (2010) explained, "Taking the teachers' experiences as central to the professional development process respects their practices while at the same time makes learning memorable and relevant to their contexts" (p. 131). To draw from personal experience, hooks (2003/2019) emphasized the importance of personal narratives: "to remind folks that we are all struggling to raise our consciousness and figure out the best action to take" (p. 107). Much like Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (2009) view of "inquiry as stance," the focus of the dialogue "is grounded in the problems and contexts of practice in the first place and in the ways practitioners collaboratively theorize, study, and act on those problems" (p. 123). They continued to explain, "a core part of the knowledge and expertise necessary for transforming practice and enhancing students' learning resides in the questions, theories, and strategies generated collectively by practitioners themselves and in their joint interrogations of the knowledge, practices, and theories of others" (p. 124).

The personal connection between our group members and the issues we tackled together meant that we were intrinsically motivated to grapple with them. While some members of the PLC had not previously considered the impact of gender and sexuality on their teaching practices or classroom conversations, it was not long before participants recognized the underpinnings and complexities that gender and sexuality have in the classroom even in districts that pride

themselves on being progressive and equitable. Rebecca, for instance, said more than once that she had never considered gender to be an influence in how her students experienced her class. Then, in a spontaneous turn where she shared frustrations about a particular class and student, she admitted that he seemed to dislike her simply because she was a woman teacher with authority. The more we discussed gender and sexuality, the more participants began to recognize related issues. Some observations were of casual ways students and teachers upheld and engaged in gender stereotyping, labeling, and ranking. Tyler noted students identifying as girls wanting to use the word “b*tch” in a rhyme they were creating for a class project. Joan noted a student carelessly referring to a woman author as a “girl.” Mary noted that her students who present as male had more control of the class discussion. Other observations recognized more overt and problematic issues. Dale noted the inequities LGBTQ+ students experienced with additional rules and financial obligations on class trips involving overnight stays in hotel rooms. Liz and Sara revised their practices in teaching literature that addresses sexual assault. Grace noted the difficulty in responding to high school seniors using offensive, homophobic, and misogynistic slurs during a class activity. I noted the frustration in responding to a student questioning why he was being “forced” to learn about the LGBTQ+ community.

Beyond our individual experiences addressing and discussing issues related to gender and sexuality, we also observed the issues happening in our school community. Our dialogue about the Antonio Brown student newspaper article marked early on that our focus would not be contained to our individual classroom walls. We were members of a broader community and could not ignore the misogyny and sexism being printed and distributed throughout our hallways. We noticed and discussed issues of leveling with students identifying as male being over-represented in lower level classes. We noticed STEM classes consistently had lower enrollment

of students identifying as female, while humanities classes had lower enrollment of students identifying as male. We noticed a lack of administrator support for our Black women student leaders who organized an intersectional, inclusive community march. Seeing these issues in our own school setting, fortified our commitment to addressing them. That the issues we were discussing were timely and personal gave us a sense of urgency in our commitment.

Feminist Community Building is a Cyclical, Iterative, Messy Process: And That's Okay

Many feminist pedagogues identify their initial meetings with new classes or community groups as critical in deliberately setting the tone and the foundation for an egalitarian community; strategies often include engaging students' or participants' voices, demonstrating vulnerability, and negotiating coursework and expectations (Bohny et al., 2016; Coia & Taylor, 2006, 2013; Copp & Kleinman, 2008; Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009; Rohrer, 2018). But feminist pedagogy and feminist communities cannot be achieved in one or two sessions; the processes are ongoing and require flexibility, participant feedback, adjustments, maintenance, consideration, and care (Bohny et al., 2016; Danvers et al., 2019; Ellsworth, 1992; Pereira, 2012; Murray & Kalayji, 2018; Romney et al., 1992; Taylor et al., 2002; Taylor & Coia, 2019). I used the critical cycle (Souto-Manning, 2010) as inspiration in naming the phases our circle underwent in the process of becoming a feminist, dialogic community. Instead of "generating themes," however, I used the name "community building" to describe our first phase. The next three names aligned with the critical cycle: problem posing, problem solving, and action. The names refer to the predominant theme of the phase, but in actuality, we were continually cycling through all of the stages in an iterative process. (e.g. In the problem posing stage, we did not *only* problem pose).

Critical Reflection through Dialogue. Reflection can come in many forms. Ours primarily came through dialogue, though we also wrote to each other in comments, emails, and

chats. Freire and Macedo (1995) argued, “Dialogue characterizes an epistemological relationship. Thus, in this sense, dialogue is a way of knowing” (p. 39). Our dialogic sessions were ways of coming to know and better understand issues related to gender and sexuality and our practices and perspectives (conscious and unconscious) in addressing these issues when they arise in our classrooms. As participants shared stories of their experiences or ideas for taking action, other members of our circle engaged in reflection of their own practices and hypothesized how they could change their future practices. Participants voiced questions both for themselves and for the group. We wondered aloud. Taylor and Coia (2019) found that this type of sharing of stories led to insight: “We come to know through the interweaving of our stories through dialogue so that validity, insight, and analysis all emerge as we write together exploring issues of concern” (p. 8). These moments of insight, reflective dialogue also provided a bridge between problem posing and problem solving. Souto-Manning (2010) described, “Through dialogue, participants critically analyze their positions in and across communities of practice. In doing so, they engage in rethinking their realities and practices” (p. 40). A notable example of this rethinking happened when Liz’s story working with a student who felt triggered about sexual assault in their class text sparked other members of the circle—Sara, Mary, Dale, Grace, Charlie, and Harper—to rethink their own practices when sexual assault (or other triggering material) is likely to come up in class discussion. Dialogue was critical to engaging participants in reflection and in moving us toward problem solving and taking action.

Progressing and Failing toward Action. From our group, I learned not to take small victories, small actions, nor seemingly “failed” actions for granted. Here, I mean to disrupt the usual connotation of “failure” as a negative in order to reframe it as “more generative and positive” (Glasby, 2019, p. 29). Our attempted actions with the Antonio Brown article could be

seen as a sort of failure, in that we neither talked to the students, nor did we convince administrators to do anything meaningful in response. Still, there were positive outcomes. Most notable outcomes were the bonds forged between Joan and me and solidified amongst our community. Crucible moments of collective struggle often cement fellowship between teachers engaged in the difficult work of social justice. Our attempt to form coalitions with student groups could also be seen as a sort of failure. The first meeting with The Feminist Club did not go as expected. There was some disappointment from both Liz and Charlie, who acted as liaisons with The Feminist Club, and the other members of our circle when we debriefed their meeting. We had hoped for clear and actionable items that we could collaborate with the club to solve. The students of The Feminist Club had broader complaints about school in general more than issues related to gender and sexuality. A more obvious failure was the interruption of COVID-19 and the subsequent quarantine, which prevented a follow-up meeting with The Feminist Club and an initial meeting with the Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA). Still, the quarantine disruption was also generative. Our work was paused for two months but when we reunited, the challenges of quarantine resulted in creative problem solving and community bonding across new mediums: Google Meets, Google Docs, and Google Classroom. We also moved more deliberately into action.

In our opening meeting, several participants emphasized their hope that change would come out of our bi-weekly dialogue sessions. Our concept of change and action, at first, was more abstract and our commitment to it more theoretical. Two of us took bold action early when we attempted to discuss the misogynistic Antonio Brown article about sexual assault with three student authors. The stressful interaction with administrators that ensued sent us into hibernation for several months (at least in terms of taking explicit school-wide actions). We tried other

strategies to affect change. Our process in taking action slowed but it also became more deliberate. Before taking collective action, we engaged in critical dialogue marked by questioning and reflecting on how we should proceed in ways that would be harder for the administration to dismiss. We had to work through the tensions of compromising. Failures and tensions often led to new pathways rather than to dead-ends.

Feminist Communities Inside Patriarchal Institutions

One of the consistent challenges we faced was the extent to which we worked with or against the traditional hierarchy of schooling. I wanted to heed Lorde's (1984) reminder: "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (p. 112). Feminists reject oppression, patriarchy, authoritarianism, shaming, and competition as tools we will not use to construct our communities. But what about other tools of the system? The professional learning community might be considered a tool of the master: it is a top-down mandate (in our district and many others) with a focus on student growth objectives, rubrics, data, tests and assessments (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). Members of PLCs in our district have to provide documentation of their meetings and their products in order to fulfill the district's professional development requirements. Beyond these dictums, we were given no mandates for topics and no guidelines for how PLC sessions should be run. I saw this lack of guidance as freedom and opportunity to experiment with PLCs as feminist and queer. Are there some master's tools that can be appropriated, disrupted, and queered in ways that fight authoritarianism and oppression from the inside? This study was an attempt to disrupt a space traditionally owned and operated by the patriarchal, neoliberal school system. From the findings, our feminist space, in part, provided a safe nook to name and examine oppressions. When we attempted to use our community in acts of resistance and action, we were met with resistance from the system. In other words, as long as

we were not trying to change or transform anything, we were ignored. Becoming activists and change agents meant taking risks that made us more vulnerable and more conspicuous (Butler, 2016). Thus, we were also exposed to more scrutiny.

Negotiating Power and Partnerships with the Group. The patriarchal model of teaching employs a pyramid hierarchy with learners at the bottom. A typical classroom has one, maybe two teachers leading a class of fifteen to thirty+ students. This model of centralized leadership recreates itself across many contexts. In faculty meetings, a large group of educators generally sits and listens to a small group of administrators speak. In professional development, it is common for one speaker or facilitator to lead a large group in a traditional lecture-style presentation. Disrupting this model can cause confusion, resistance, and hesitation. In our group's formation, I intended to share leadership with all members of our PLC. The participants, however, seemed ready and willing to defer to me. They shared ideas when I asked them to. They participated in the opening activity of norming our expectations, hopes, goals, and concerns. They even asked for homework. They were willing to be good students. When I suggested taking turns leading sessions, there was a palpable hesitation. Mary vocalized what others seemed to be feeling: you model first. We're not ready for that. Over time, participants took on varying degrees of leadership and ownership of what we discussed and what actions we took. First, several participants shared stories about an event or ongoing issue they were working through in their classrooms. Other members present for these stories shared the floor as we discussed—we posed questions, concerns, suggestions, and potential responses in future scenarios. Next, Liz's idea of meeting with student groups to create partnerships and coalitions presented an opportunity for several group members to volunteer as the liaisons to meet with the groups and report back. Our Google Classroom thread also presented an opportunity for any

group member to post a question for feedback, which allowed for all group members to offer feedback, advice, and suggestions. Informally, we negotiated leadership as an ongoing process.

Negotiating Power and Partnerships with Administration. As we focused more on actions, we also experienced tensions with our administration. When we were a group in dialogue, our administration largely left us alone. When we took action, the administration took notice and reacted. In our first, early interaction, when Joan and I attempted to speak with the three student authors of the Antonio Brown newspaper article, the administration's response was quick, unsympathetic, confused, and authoritarian. Maybe they viewed their role as protecting the students. But their interactions with us, their colleagues, were harmful to our working relationships (most notably in Joan feeling unable to trust them and our group feeling that they were not allies in our social justice work). Their fear of how Joan and I would facilitate a dialogue with students revealed a distrust in us and a condescension toward our ability to proceed with empathy and a commitment to fairness. We were put in our place in the patriarchal hierarchy and told to, in so many words, *stay in our lane*.

Over the bulk of our sessions, most of which focused on cycles of problem posing and problem solving, our group had little to no interaction with the administration. In the spring, we reached out to the administration with an email request that they publicly honor Juneteenth in their daily announcements. We knew that being part of transformational change in our school community required a partnership with our administration. In discussing our Juneteenth email action and other ways we hoped to push our departments forward, we discussed who our potential allies were. This dialogue was reminiscent of the advice Charlie and I gave to Rebecca in a much earlier session encouraging her to find her allies. We considered our department chairs, the vice principals, the new assistant superintendent, and the outside professor hired to

lead social justice professional development with cohorts of teachers in our district. About my own department chair, I explained to the group: “I think that she’s somewhat of an ally, and also sometimes puts the brakes on more than is necessary” (Transcript 10, 17 June 2020). Paige noted, “We definitely don’t have [the Principal], and I don’t think it’s even on [the Vice Principal’s] radar, like, we don’t even have their buy-in. So, even the efforts that have been done, like this PLC, aren’t being acknowledged” (Transcript 10, 17 June 2020). Joan added, “It’s sad, how completely like unsupported I feel. . . . Our department, specifically, needs to have conversations about this because I really don’t feel like I can bring this up in class” (Transcript 10, 17 June 2020). Not feeling supported by department chairs and administrators in our social justice work created a tension that made taking action less tenable. Ullman (2018) studied the difference in two clusters of schools and their approaches to gender and sexuality diversity. The cluster of schools with clearly communicated purpose and commitment to inclusivity from school leadership helped foster a culture that was celebratory and affirming of gender and sexuality. Ullman (2018) concluded, “When educators are empowered by school policies and leadership which explicitly invite them to share in a broad-based social agenda for their school communities. . . . they are better enabled to work beyond heteronormative gender frameworks” (p. 507). Without school policies and leadership buying in, we met struggle and resistance rather than support and encouragement.

Being Palatable Versus Being Subversive. Tensions with administration also led to members of the group struggling between being polite or being perceived as unruly, disruptive, loud, or “com[ing] off a bit strong” (Principal, 31 October 2019). In our dialogues that focused on taking action—The Antonio Brown article, the student email about LGBTQ+ curriculum, our co-email about Juneteenth, and the discussion about naming our group—one of the primary

points of tensions we faced repeatedly was finding the balance between being “palatable,” as Paige described it, and being insistent that injustices should be addressed. We often worried about tone, word choice, perception, reputation, and reception. We anticipated how our actions might be received by superiors, parents, students, and other colleagues. These concerns conflicted with our commitments to action, activism, and social justice. Several members voiced concerns over being non-tenured. Others voiced concerns over being evaluated by department chairs and administrators. Many worried simply about the discomfort, fear, and aversion of having confrontations or feeling like they might be in trouble.

As our group was composed of individuals with a range of feelings and attitudes, our dialogue gave us space to voice our various levels of concern and to try to work through them. We made compromises and concessions, as well as took precautions. For instance, we left the non-tenured teachers’ names off of our emails to the administration as a way to protect them. They participated in our community and our co-writing but remained anonymous when we engaged more publicly with the school. Amongst the tenured participants, we took turns volunteering who would send emails to administration. We did not have an official email account that could provide a layer of collective anonymity, so we rotated the responsibility.

As a group of mostly white educators who identify as allies, I must also critically examine the problem of needing to be polite for a group who held a fair amount of privilege and protection (for those of us who held tenure). Kendall (2020) argued for the uses of anger in transforming systems and the problem with politeness (especially by white feminist allies): “No one has ever freed themselves from oppression by asking nicely. Instead they had to fight, sometimes with words and sometimes with bullets” (p. 251). Kendall differentiated white allies from white accomplices. White feminist allies, she explained, “want the polite facade instead of

disruption. They insist that they know best what should be done when attempting to battle and defeat bias, but in actuality they're just happy to be useless" (p. 254). Were *we* "happy to be useless"? How do white allies move from being allies to being accomplices? How do we get over the conditioning of obedience and politeness and decorum? Kendall (2020) argued:

This is a space where we must be able to have hard conversations after conflict, because sometimes the political is personal. Being a good accomplice is where the real work gets done. That means taking the risks inherent in wielding privilege to defend communities with less of it. (p. 255)

Decidedly, our collective actions could not be labeled disruptive, though it still felt like risk-taking. Our Juneteenth email, for instance, was reasonable, polite, and low-stakes. More than a request for "social justice," it was a request for mere acknowledgment of an important American holiday marking the freedom of enslaved people. We did take action but we also prioritized safety and politeness more than demanding justice or real transformational change.

Resistance as Vulnerability; Vulnerability as Resistance. Butler's (2016) essay on the relationship between vulnerability and resistance might help explain why we hesitated to fully resist administration or take more disruptive actions. Working to dismantle a system from within means engaging in resistance—which is dangerous. Butler (2016) argued that any group coming together in resistance to power and oppression is inextricably also a vulnerable community. Butler et al. (2016), in the same volume, described, "Vulnerability is part of resistance, made manifest by new forms of embodied political interventions and modes of alliance that are characterized by interdependence and public action" (p. 7). Butler (2016) described, "Vulnerability is enhanced by assembling" (p. 12) because those who assemble in resistance are often met with force. The authoritarian system uses oppression, punishment, threat, and violence.

Activists are vulnerable to these consequences but are also key in disrupting the cycle of oppression:

Feminism is a crucial part of these networks of solidarity and resistance precisely because feminist critique destabilizes those institutions that depend on the reproduction of inequality and injustice, and it criticizes those institutions and practices that inflict violence on women and gender minorities, and, in fact, all minorities subject to police power for showing up and speaking out as they do. (Butler, 2016, p. 20)

While teachers in the United States are not subjected to physical violence at the hands of their administration, they can be (and are) threatened with poor evaluations, not being offered tenure, job loss, difficult assignments and schedules, attacks on reputation, verbal admonishment, increased duties, micromanagement, forced transfer, and other tactics of intimidation (Gonzales, 2010; Smith, 2010). Knowledge of these threats made members of our circle feel vulnerable and hesitant to meet resistance. Unlike the sharing of our personal experiences as acts of vulnerability, this type of vulnerability was not negotiated and we could do little to protect one another. There was risk in knowingly facing an unknown response, which might be as minor as a disappointed look but could be much more serious. Butler (2016) concluded, “I want to argue affirmatively that vulnerability, understood as a deliberate exposure to power, is part of the very meaning of political resistance as an embodied enactment” (p. 22). This study highlighted ways an activist group might attempt to mitigate the vulnerability when taking actions that expose themselves to power and authority: we protected non-tenured members with anonymity, we shared taking lead in communicating with school leaders, we co-wrote responses with careful attention to language and tone, and we came out publicly as a group committed to social justice. Mura (2018) drew on Sun Tzu to offer the following advice: “Sun Tzu teaches that to retreat or

lay low in times when one does not have power or sufficient numbers is not weakness; it is wisdom. Sun Tzu teaches that taking time to build allies and gather forces is not weakness but wisdom” (p. 60). The struggle is in knowing when it is necessary to find allies and gather forces and when we are lying to ourselves, as Kendall (2020) reminds white feminists they too often do. A collective group can dialogue about these boundaries and challenge one another’s perceptions of fear against the goals of progress.

Discussion of Queering Feminist Facilitation

In queering my feminist facilitation, I had to disrupt my definitions of what it means to facilitate. My perception of facilitation, I now realize, was heavily influenced by a patriarchal lens. Despite my commitment to feminist pedagogy and processes, I still feared the role of leader, expert, and academic. The etymology, from the Latin *facilis*, translates to “easy” (Merriam-Webster). In other words, my role was to make our process easier. Maybe if I had read this definition a bit earlier I would not have agonized so much over the process. Maybe I would have had more fun. While I embraced the questioning and disrupting of the queer lens, I could have certainly experimented more space for the playful, the quirky, and the celebratory—also markers of queering one’s gaze (Quilty, 2017; Waite, 2019). Instead, the patriarchal, authoritarian inner eye of shame haunted me (hooks, 2003/2019). Shame, hooks (2003/2019) argued, is used as a weapon, tool, and strategy of patriarchal domination that members of oppressed groups internalize. Brown (2012) likened shame to a straightjacket for women, in particular. After several iterations of reflecting both on our group’s dialogues and on my journal reflections, I came to see an alarming difference in how I perceived the group and our collective action compared to the way I perceived myself and my individual actions. I never criticized the participants or my students (or any other people in my life, for that matter) in the same way that I

admonished myself. I struggled with separating the harmful practice of self-reproach from the healthy practice of critical self-reflection.

Uncertainty Defining Queer Facilitation

Repeatedly, I stumbled on how to define, frame, and enact queering my facilitation. I struggled to define a clear picture of what it meant to facilitate and what it meant to queer facilitation of a feminist culture circle. I was plagued by these questions: How much structure and planning should I do for each session? How much should I lead? What is the facilitator's role during discussion? What is the facilitator's role between sessions? To what extent should I participate? How do I know if I'm actually *queering* my thinking or my facilitating? Am I talking too much? I wanted to get it right *right* away, without giving myself the space and possibility that there was no right to achieve. And to queer is also to be open to many possibilities (Luhmann, 1998; Miller, 1998; Shlasko, 2005). I often bemoaned my slow, confusing, and unclear process with an inner voice and perspective that was often much more authoritarian and rigid than the voice and perspective I used to interact with my fellow participants.

I cycled through a few different versions of facilitation over our year of meeting together. First, I embraced feminist facilitation by leading a norming session and negotiating our expectations during our first session. We met in my classroom (while we were in-person), and I generally opened discussions (e.g. "Alright. Shall we get started?" [Transcript 6, 6 January 2020]) and closed the sessions ("Okay. Thank you everybody." [Transcript 3, 4 November 2019]). A few times, I took a more traditional facilitator role by assigning "homework" including an assignment to observe and reflect on gender in our classrooms, an article to read and discuss (Butler-Wall et al., 2016), and a viewing and discussion of Hannah Gadsby's Netflix special,

“Nanette” (2018). But these more overt enactments of facilitation made me question and opine over whether or not I was doing too much. In sessions, I vacillated between sharing my own stories, ideas, and comments as if I were just another one of the participants and holding back to make sure I was not dominating too much of the speaking floor.

A Former Student as Queer Feminist Facilitator Model

After a year struggling to figure out what it meant to queer my facilitation, I witnessed, and experienced as a participant, a model of facilitation that felt both feminist and queer. Kashvi, a former student of mine, led a virtual meeting with care, empathy, intention, and structure. This meeting was a coalition of sorts between alumnx from our district, current student members of the Black Student Union, a community parent who is also a teacher in a nearby district, and me (a teacher in the district). Kashvi began by inviting each participant to introduce themselves and to name a book they are currently reading. Kashvi did not dictate the terms of the dialogue but did help transition our conversation from problem posing to problem solving. Then, they closed the session with a reflective “grounding.” I was inspired by Kashvi’s process and demeanor and the way they embraced facilitation without embracing a patriarchal, hierarchical version of leadership. In reflection, I considered how I might embrace facilitation in a similar way, especially in the deliberate opening and closing of each session that invited each participant to pause, reflect, and use their voice. Kashvi reminded me that leadership does not oppressive tactics: feminist and queer leadership is possible.

The Importance of Reflecting on Facilitation

My researcher’s journal was an important element in critically reflecting on my facilitation, my participation in the circle, and our work. Returning to the journal after each session gave me space and time to identify my feelings around facilitation (often anxious and

unsure). It was also another way to document what we experienced as a group, especially in the interactions that occurred between our audio-recorded sessions. Critical introspection challenged me and made me uncomfortable. I reflected, the process of written reflections pushed me: “beyond my normal approach to professional introspection into my practice. . . . Writing is another vulnerability. It is exposing. It requires candidness and willingness to put myself out there as partial, imperfect, and scared” (Researcher’s Journal, 23 January 2020). My practice of journaling was valuable to me personally and professionally, as a teacher, a feminist, an activist, and a researcher attempting to queer her practice.

Implications

Queering teacher communities offers practicing teachers, across the spectrum of gender and sexuality, a lens to disrupt the stories we tell ourselves about who teachers are and who they need to be for themselves, each other, and their students. What I mean by this is, teachers need more possibilities. I wholeheartedly agree with Adichie’s (2009) sentiment that more diverse voices are needed: “Stories matter. Many stories matter” (TED, 17:36). Though, only adding more voices to our curriculum might not be enough to queer the typical story of teaching and teacher education (Miller, 1998). To be sure, more voices of queer teachers are needed. But what is also needed is the queering of the typical cisgender, straight teacher’s story and the typical methods of ongoing teacher education.

The conventional narrative of the teacher’s story reads like a parable of failure to triumph. Miller (1998) described this typical teacher narrative: “autobiographical accounts of how teachers were ‘mistaken’ or ‘uninformed’ or ‘ill-prepared’ but now have become fully knowledgeable and enlightened about themselves, their students, and their teaching practices” (p. 369). It is a tidy story. A story I am tempted to revert to in my own narrative. Miller (1998)

warned, “such singularity closes the doors to multiple, conflicting, and even odd and abnormal—queer—stories and identities” (p. 369). Heeding this warning, I want to resist the temptation to close the doors of what is possible in the implications for other teachers and teacher educators looking to queer their collaborative spaces and their facilitation. I want to open doors. Thus, I want to offer recommendations for teachers and teacher educators who are willing to push beyond the norms and boundaries of their current teaching practices. Few teacher communities focus specifically on discussing gender and sexuality, or broader social justice concerns. But I am optimistic that more social-justice oriented teachers will be ready to form community groups (A June 2020 EdWeek survey of educators found over 80% of educators supported Black Lives Matter). To those who are willing to begin similar dialogic groups and to queer their teaching spaces: commitment is more important than readiness or preparedness. Committing to this process is more dependent on a willingness to take risks, ask critical questions, be honest and vulnerable, examine your experiences, and dialogue with colleagues willing to do the same.

Queering the Traditional PLC

Are students coming out as LGBTQ+ earlier? Do teachers and educators feel comfortable using gender neutral language? What terminology and language should teachers be using that is more inclusive of all genders and sexualities? In what ways is the curriculum heteronormative, heterosexist, misogynistic? These are questions I had. I felt some of my colleagues must have similar questions and concerns. I wanted to explore these questions with other educators committed to social justice. Anecdotally, it seemed that more students were coming out in middle and high school. It seemed that our students’ perceptions of gender and sexuality were evolving—as was their language. The Human Rights Campaign’s (2018) recent survey found two thirds of LGBTQ+ youth ages 13–17 are out to their friends and family. Slightly less are out

to their teachers. I knew from GLSEN's National School Climate Survey (2019) that a few key factors create a safer environment for queer youth: a) the presence of a GSA, b) teachers who are supportive and viewed as allies, and c) curriculum that positively reflects LGBTQ+ voices, themes, and experiences. It felt important to talk with other educators about how we were addressing gender and sexuality in both implicit and explicit ways. Rather than (or in addition to) traditional professional development from outside experts or from administration, this study brought a group of teachers together in dialogue to learn from one another and to further explore perceptions and practices related to gender and sexuality.

Teacher community groups, like professional learning communities, have become a standard part of a teacher's ongoing development as an educator. Professional learning communities and inquiry based teacher groups vary district to district with different expectations for what the focus of discussion will be, what products will be created, and what kind of oversight administrators will keep. Because our context required teachers to participate in PLCs, this name is the language we used to describe our dialogic community. Alternatively, a similar group might be called a culture circle (Freire, 1970/2004), a practitioner inquiry group (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), a dialogic community, an activist group, a consciousness raising circle, etc. Under any guise, a collaborative and dialogic space bringing educators together offers an opportunity for social justice work and teacher activism. I recommend similar groups take time to focus dialogue on gender, sexuality, and the related issues of heteronormativity, heterosexism, misogyny, and homophobia. Committing to these conversations is an initial step in disrupting the silence, resistance, and confusion prevalent amongst K–12 educators teaching within systems where heteronormativity and traditional patriarchal structures remain unexamined (Butler-Wall et al., 2016; Puchner & Klein, 2011; Schieble, 2012; Thein, 2013). What's more, any dialogic

community can be queered and deliberately disrupted. We can—and should—queer the spaces we are in already “to explore and celebrate the tensions and new understandings created by teaching new ways of seeing the world” (Meyer, 2007, p. 15). Queering dialogic spaces could occur in a number of ways, but I recommend the following practices: using Freirean culture circles as a model for a democratic, dialogic, and transgressive space; prioritizing and practicing critical questioning of the participants as individuals and as a group; explicitly negotiating and renegotiating power and expectations. These recommendations represent what I would/will do as I continue to experiment, practice, and refine what it means to queer teacher communities. However, they are not meant to be prescriptive. I hope these recommendations benefit dialogic teacher communities by helping them to push, transform, disrupt, challenge, and question their perspectives, language, and practices related to gender and sexuality.

Culture Circles as Models for Queering PLCs

Freire’s (1970/2004) work with culture circles with an intense and committed focus on dialogue and the participants’ lived experiences served as a model. Over and over again, I returned to Freire’s explanations of how dialogue transforms individuals and groups, moving them toward meaningful action and change. In a more recent iteration, Souto-Manning (2010) provided compelling examples of culture circles with teachers in several different contexts: early education, pre-service, and in-service groups. Souto-Manning (2010) described:

A culture circle is built within the lifeworld of its participants and based on an understanding of their unique agency—both individual and collective. This is consistent with an empowering agenda centered in theory and research that is tied to praxis—an engaged praxis that accounts for the deliberative capacity of all individuals. Thus, culture

circles bring praxis to life by creating a process in which individuals engage simultaneously with the word and the world. (p. 41)

A culture circle positions participants (teachers) to draw from their own experiences, to hear multiple perspectives from others, to name and describe injustices, and then to use their agency to take action. Teachers in this study, like in Freire's early models, did not feel like experts (in this case, on the topic of gender and sexuality). But through the practice of dialoguing about their experiences with colleagues, they came to change their perspective from passive learners to active change agents. Culture circles disrupt hierarchy, facilitation, participant roles, participant thinking, and participant agency. Professional learning communities, on the other hand, often "retain many of the existing structures of power and privilege and may reify rather than challenge dominant epistemologies and values about the purposes of schooling . . . and the educational questions that are most worth asking" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009, p. 59). The two recommendations that follow are meant to further disrupt the practices of a teacher community to better resist the existing power structures that encroach upon democratic, feminist, queer, and activist spaces.

Queer by Questioning, Negotiating Power, and Challenging the Status Quo

In a culture circle, teachers have the opportunity to challenge their conditioning into oppressive systems. Teachers are conditioned to follow and accept rules, structures, routines, schedules, authority figures, and top-down dictates (hooks, 2003/2019). Asking questions to problematize and disrupt the status quo is central to the culture circle model and critical pedagogy (Souto-Manning, 2010). It is also central to queering, which destabilizes norms and binaries, purposefully celebrating deviance and transgression (Luhmann, 1998; Shlasko, 2005). Luhmann (1998) asked, "If subversiveness is not a new form of knowledge but lies in the

capacity to raise questions about the detours of coming to know and making sense, then what does this mean for a pedagogy that imagines itself as queer?” (p. 147). Shlasko (2005)

responded:

Where a mainstream educator might begin the planning or design process by asking himself, “What information shall I convey to my students?” a queer educator (that is, an educator engaging in queer pedagogy) could ask instead, “What questions shall we ask of each other? After we explore those questions, what will have been left out? And then, what other questions shall we ask of each other?” (p. 128)

Questioning as Key Practice. Asking critical questions of each other, and of their contexts, positions teachers as change-agents who do not have to accept the way things are (Souto-Manning, 2010). The practice of asking difficult questions engages participants in critical reflection that offers space to problem pose the issues they want to change and then to problem solve by considering how they might go about changing them. Group members can further queer a culture circle by “asking follow up questions, seeking to uncover the complex, multi-layered nature of oppressions” (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 127). In addition to the Shlasko’s meta-questions, a culture circle might continuously come back to questions such as:

- Why do you think this [practice or situation] is done this way?
- How else could we approach this [problem]?
- Who are our allies?
- Is this fair?
- Who is being included/excluded/valued?
- Whose voices are heard/not heard?
- Who does this [practice] benefit?

- What can we do? What actions/responses are most appropriate in this situation? Why?
- What binaries are we unintentionally or unconsciously upholding, and why?
- How can we disrupt these binaries and our thinking about them?

To reflect on actions, participants might ask:

- What happened?
- In what ways did we disrupt the status quo?
- How did we feel about what happened?
- What seemed to work?
- What would we change or do differently? Why?
- What else could/should be done?
- What can we learn from this experience?

Asking questions in iterative cycles encourages critical consciousness. Disrupting thinking hopefully leads to disrupting oppressive systems.

Negotiating Power and Participation

Ideally, a dialogic community would form an egalitarian space that disrupts the traditional hierarchy of school systems. Realistically, a queer, feminist culture circle will struggle. Democratic, feminist, queer communities require effort, intention, love, and maintenance. A community garden can be a beautiful, living, flourishing gathering place but only when community members do the work: planting, watering, pruning, weeding, picking up litter. In a similar way, members of a culture circle will need to roll up their sleeves and till the earth. But doing this work can also feed the soul. In this study, we deliberately negotiated our expectations in the opening session. In reflection, I noted how valuable it would be to return to negotiating in more deliberate intervals.

Teachers need spaces where they are free from judgment, shaming, discouragement, and the feeling that they could “get in trouble.” Fear of scrutiny and consequences quells honest, open, and vulnerable dialogue, while tamping down action and risk-taking. For this reason, our culture circle chose to focus on practicing teachers as participants without the presence of administrators or department chairs who evaluate us. Negotiating whether or not community members feel comfortable and safe with administrators participating is an important part of building a trusting and vulnerable environment. Working closely with administrators is a necessary part of taking action and implementing community change. If the group does feel comfortable working with administrators as participants, examining power and trust should be an iterative process that the group continues to discuss and examine. Kishimoto and Mwangi (2009) described, “to teach vulnerably is to constantly be aware of the power dynamics of the classroom. How we confront these dynamics is an indication of what we do and how we teach” (p. 96). Kishimoto and Mwangi (2009) recognize that as professors with power and authority, they need to deliberately model vulnerability with their students. In the work of Ellsworth (1992), Freire (1970/2004), hooks (1994), the challenge of disrupting power in this work is apparent. For administrators, listening to and respecting the classroom teachers’ boundaries and requests for autonomy would likely help mitigate some potential tensions. Several of our group members did not feel safe when administrators and department chairs requested to be participants in our circle. The compromise participants hoped to establish was to have every other meeting with administrators present: this would give time for classroom teachers to discuss, plan, strategize, and open up without fear of repercussion, while at the same time allowing for communication and collaboration with administration that was ongoing. Unfortunately, our administration rejected this request and gave us an ultimatum: disband or

invite all administrators to be full participants. The demand disheartened several members of the group—a few chose to leave the group rather than participate with administrators present. The administration forced hierarchy by prioritizing oversight over their teachers' request for autonomy, space, and trust. Each district and community will need to assess, communicate, and negotiate the relationship and terms that fosters trust, respect, mutuality, and communication.

For the classroom teacher participants in this study, the negotiation of power varied from rebellious and obstinate to obedient and compliant. The questions we continued to ask were: In what ways can we resist? To what extent can we negotiate our terms, requests, and expectations? How do we balance our need for autonomy and our need for effective and collaborative relationships with administration?

Disrupting the Status Quo and the Importance of Community. Disrupting the status quo sounds simple and fun. The hard-fought civil rights movements across generations should remind us that it is not simple. PRIDE parades are fun but they were (and continue to be) riotous and revolutionary that necessitated facing real violence and threats. The Black Lives Matter movement has faced threat and violence since 2014—violence which was even more wide-scale in the protests through the spring and summer of 2020. I bring this up because even teachers committed to social justice are not likely prepared to face the potential consequences of disrupting the status quo in their schools. A culture circle—or similar community—can be a support system to work through fears and concerns, to practice disrupting in a safer environment, and to plan and organize collective action that may be received. Picower (2012) noted that the teacher activists she interviewed sought out communities and coalitions of like-minded teachers, “which they felt provided them with knowledge, motivation, strength, a sense of accountability, and the ability to keep going in the face of adversity” (p. 570). I recommend building safe

communities for teachers to discuss oppression and activism and using those communities to support, protect, and encourage members as they find ways to be “co-conspirators” (Love, 2019) and “accomplices” (Kendall, 2020). This is the process and mantra I repeat to myself: Find your allies. Keep asking questions. Be vulnerable. Sit with discomfort. Disrupt. Take actions, big and small. Be prepared for “failure.” Reflect and regroup. In reflection on teacher activism, Kumashiro (2002) explained:

But sometimes, such as now, in that never-ending, always-troubling work of activism, I need to remind myself of my responsibilities and all that has yet to be done. I need to reconnect with others doing this kind of work, and rethink and readjust my life so that it does not feel isolated, depressing, and disconnected. (p. 195)

Community—connecting with others doing the work—is the most important recommendation I can make for pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and teacher educators who are committed to social justice in their teaching and in their lives. Blackburn (2010) encouraged, “Frustration can be an obstacle to our work, to be sure. . . . Love yourselves for being committed to the work. Support one another in the work” (p. 158).

Implications for Queering Feminist Facilitation

Bathrub and Steiner (2000) wrote, “Orchestrating a culture circle is intellectually demanding and requires constant reflection and criticism of one’s own pedagogy” (p. 122). Adding a queer lens to this facilitation does not make the work less demanding—and the need for constant reflection and criticism remains just as important. A queer lens can reshape and challenge a facilitator’s questioning during the group’s dialogue and their own self-reflection between sessions. How? What can feminist facilitators do to queer their practices? I echo the recommendation offered by Harvey et al. (2016): “be prepared for it to be not as feminist and

collaborative as you idealize” (p. 154). They further advised, “acceptance of where we were at individually and as a group, rather than only on where we wished we were, has allowed us to move forward” (p. 154). I will add: be prepared for it to not be as queer as you idealize. Feminist work and queer work is the process of becoming (Freire, 1970/2004; Coia & Taylor, 2013). Queer pedagogues not only advise perceiving the work as a process but really relishing in the spaces between, the unknowing, the murky, the ambiguous, and the reaching toward but never fully realizing (Britzman, 1998; Glasby, 2019; Shlasko, 2005; Waite, 2019). I am not sure I ever embraced or internalized this acceptance and celebration for failure and ambiguity (Coll & Charlton, 2018). While I never figured out the formula that felt like I got queering “right,” I have identified a few practices that felt effective, even when they did not feel comfortable.

Creating Safe Spaces for Conscientization (Freire, 1970/2004)

As discussed in previous sections, PLCs using culture circles as models draw from the teachers’ experiences to create the group’s subject matter. The facilitator’s (if there is one) role during sessions is to help participants feel safe in sharing their experiences. An outsider facilitator will have a much different experience than I did as an insider of the district: a colleague, friend, co-teacher, fellow participant and activist. Souto-Manning (2010) documented her work as a culture circle facilitator who was an outsider academic and researcher. She explained her role conducting a culture circle with preservice teachers:

I saw my role as a learner and as a facilitator, as someone who could create a safe environment for a community of learners who would in turn critically examine the world while striving to change it. In a Freirean way, my intention for us was to read the world together, undressing layer after layer of injustice. So, while I offered the comfort of a safe

place, I also pushed these pre-service teachers to look at the realities and acknowledge many injustices the children they were teaching were experiencing. (p. 109)

As an outsider, Souto-Manning first conducted extensive ethnographic observations to document and gather evidence to familiarize herself with the community within which she would be facilitating the culture circle. Whether outsider or insider, the facilitator does not script what will happen, what will be discussed, or what actions will be taken. The problems addressed, the dialogue the group engages in, the potential responses and actions taken are all generated by the participants. I recommend a facilitator in this role embrace a willingness to relinquish control and (work to) accept the discomfort of the unknown. The end goal, outcomes, and actions cannot be predetermined. But a feminist facilitator can queer the dialogue by asking questions that challenge and disrupt adherence to the status quo, traditional binaries, traditional power structures, and heteronormative assumptions.

Queering Self-Reflection More Deliberately. Coia and Taylor (2009) wrote, “Stories are interpretations but they also need continual interpreting” (p. 7). After each PLC session, I spent 20–45 minutes reflecting in my researcher’s journal. A few times, I forgot (I hesitate to admit). One time, I used my phone to voice record my thoughts while on a walk. In hindsight, I think it would have been helpful to voice record more of my reflections, as it would have given me more flexibility in where, when, and how I reflected. Some individuals may have a preference between speaking or writing their reflections. For me, the possibilities and the experimentation are important.

I would not advocate for a regimented set of questions, but I believe my reflections would have benefitted from consideration of the following types of questions:

- What questions did I ask in this session? What questions did we ask?

- What questions do I have following this session?
- How am I feeling about facilitating?
- In what ways did I disrupt power? Binaries? The status quo? In what ways could I have disrupted power, binaries, and the status quo?
- How can I queer my gaze about [topic, story, situation]?

I believe these questions would have helped generate my exploration of queer facilitation.

Bringing these questions to the group could also generate helpful and productive discussion that might have eased my concerns and would have involved the participants in negotiating the type of facilitating that was best for our community. Making my reflections part of our group reflections would have made it a community process as opposed to an individual one (Taylor & Coia, 2019).

Concluding Thoughts: A Call for Community

There is so much that still needs to be researched in teacher communities interested in discussing social justice, and in particular, the heteronormativity, misogyny, misogynoir, patriarchy, and homophobia still prevalent in the neoliberal education system (Miller, 2015). The GLSEN National Student Climate Survey (2018) found that the presence of an active Gender and Sexuality Alliance was one of the major markers of LGBTQ+ student safety within a school. Woolley (2016) noted the activism of a school's GSA in pushing back against a neoliberal school system. GSAs bring marginalized and vulnerable student populations together in a supportive community, many of which are also critically reflective and activists working to change policies and attitudes in their school communities (Goodenow et al., 2006; Toomey et al., 2011; Walls et al., 2010). I envision a similar benefit and effect for teachers who come together

to form their own communities. Why are there not any faculty Gender and Sexuality Alliances? (Are there? Is that what our group was?)

Only a few studies have been published focusing on collaborative, activist communities in this area. Blackburn et al. (2010) have a unique activist community dedicated to dismantling homophobia. Their collaboration includes K–12 practitioners, university professors, GSA advisors, queer identifying members, and straight allies. Schniedewind and Cathers (2003) saw promising results from a partnership between university professors and one school district in New York (Unfortunately, the program lost funding). DePalma and Atkinson (2009, 2010) led professional development with U.K. primary school teachers working to challenge heteronormativity. In online forums, they created a community space to facilitate a collaborative discussion of the participants' individual inquiry projects. These collaborations had promising results exemplifying different ways teachers can collaborate to address oppressions related to gender and sexuality. In the decade since, few other collaborations have explored the many ways queer theory, queer pedagogy, and queerly feminist pedagogy could be employed to engage teachers together in ground-up anti-oppressive community, dialogue, and practice.

There has to be a closing to this study even though the work continues. I am certainly not done. I am not done reading, learning, growing, dialoguing, creating, building, or fighting. The work of social justice, gender equity, and teacher activism is ongoing. It is challenging and exhausting and heartbreaking. In "Civil Disobedience," Thoreau (1849) wrote, "A [person] has not everything to do, but something; and because [they] cannot do everything, it is not necessary that [they] should do something wrong" (para. 20). (I believe Thoreau, and his nonconformist heart, would not mind me queering his text to be more gender inclusive). There are different interpretations of these lines, but I have always read them to mean that those of us fighting (and

there have been people fighting all along) cannot take all of it on. We can do something, and so we must. What's more, Thoreau was calling out abolitionists who were upholding a system they proclaimed to be resisting. He argued for them to see the wrongs they too were guilty of and should immediately put an end to. Most educators work in patriarchal and authoritative systems that reproduce oppression. For those of us who proclaim to fight for social justice, we must constantly examine ourselves and our practices for the ways in which we could be engaging in oppressive work unintentionally (Kumashiro, 2002). Doing this level of critical self-reflection is daunting. I still resist (and must resist) absolute truths and firm conclusions but I do believe this: having a community of allies and accomplices almost certainly provides a partial remedy. Lorde (1984) wrote, "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression" (p. 112). The work to queer our practices in feminist communities must be work that examines the master's tools and shows us which of our own practices, our language, and our rules are really the master's and must be discarded. Queering feminist communities challenges educators to question, disrupt, resist, and dismantle the patriarchy that exists around us in our schools and classrooms—but also within us, embedded in our consciousness as shame, self-doubt, and fear.

It is not surprising that Thoreau was part of a tight-knit group of progressive writers, activists, educators, and intellectuals who fought for abolition, Indigenous rights, and women's rights (e.g. Alcott, Emerson, and Fuller). Part of their activism was meeting consistently over several years to discuss and collectively examine the world and the issues most in need of social reform. From their discussion, they wrote, they published, they spoke out, and they protested. They called their community, "The Transcendental Club." To *transcend* means to move beyond boundaries. A very queer sentiment, indeed. I see the Transcendentalists as part of the lineage of

social justice movements: a legacy and a history of community, activism, questioning, and boundary pressing. Further down in this lineage leads to Freire's culture circles, feminist consciousness raising groups, the Black Panthers, LGBTQ+ movements, and Black Lives Matter—all of which are crucial for anti-oppressive education. As hooks (1994) conveyed, “The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility. . . . I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom” (p. 12). This spirit of transgression and activism can be scary but trusting communities can provide the space for teachers to support and encourage one another to press those boundaries and move toward freedom.

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