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Queer Life and School Culture: Troubling Genders



By
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Gender is a slippery notion. We are all engendered creatures. But in what ways are we engendered? The ways in which we imagine what gender is shapes how we see ourselves in relation to others. Yet it is not clear what the category gender is, what it means, how it functions, whose interest it serves. The paradox about studying gender is that the more I have studied it (the monstrous creature that it is), the less clear I have become about what it is. I wonder whether gender is a useful category at all. Is gender a fiction?

Generally, this article will examine the complicated relations between gender and sexuality. More specifically, I will couch gender and sexuality in the field of queer studies and education and argue that whatever gender and sexuality might mean, these concepts must include discussions around queerness, otherwise gender debates get aligned with heteronormative assumptions. Finally, I will talk about queer life and school culture. Teachers need to understand what queer life is like for young people. If teachers have no clue, they could perhaps unconsciously make it harder on queer students and queer faculty by projecting pre-judgments and rigid gender expectations onto people who are different from themselves.

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The taken-for-granted assumption during the 1950s and 1960s around the notion of gender signals that gender attaches itself to sex in the paradigm sex=gender (Morris, 1998). It becomes hard to think about gender without thinking about sex. Donna Haraway remarks that “Nature/culture and sex/gender are not loosely related pairs of terms; their specific form of relation is hierarchical appropriation, connected as Aristotle taught by the logic of active/passive, form/matter, achieved form/resource, man/animal, nature and culture, as well as sex and gender, [which] mutually (but not equally) construct each other, one pole of the dualism cannot exist without the other” (Haraway, 1989, p. 12).

Further, sex seems to be that which lies under gender: sex is to nature as gender is to culture. Sex is biological, anatomical; gender is sociocultural (Seidman, 1997; Moi, 1999; Young-Bruehl, 1998). Sex, in this paradigm is supposed to correspond to the given, while gender floats on top as an after thought. But as Haraway points out, there is no such animal as the given. There is nothing natural or pre-determined, or essential about the category sex. These seemingly innocuous gender/sex creatures-categories are not innocent or harmless. Historically, both have served to oppress.

Sex=male/female;gender=male/female/feminine. How does one define what masculinity is? How does one define femininity? What if a male is effeminate and a female masculine, then what? During the 1950s and 1960s, when the medical community could not figure out what to do with

“incorrect” gender roles and incorrect sexual anatomies (hermaphrodites), they invented the term “gender identity disorder” or more precisely GID. It was psychoanalyst Robert Stoller who invented this fiction (Young-Bruehl, 1998). If your child is a boy and thinks himself to be a girl, or if your child is a girl and fancies herself a boy, some in the medical community still might diagnose your children with GID. Yesterday’s shock treatment is today’s sex change operation. Operations on sex and gender work to normalize. Get your children STRAITENED out, literally.

Part of this literalizing, medicalizing, normalizing technology/discourse (it takes a technician-doctor to anatomically alter sex and a narrative around which to justify doing it to begin with) has to do with the idea that sexuality/biology are grounded in TRUTH, the essential truth of being. What you are, in your sex, must match what you do in your behaviors (gender roles). If not, you are trouble. Hence, Judith Butler’s (1990) phrase gender trouble. When sex is thought to be an essence, a core, a truth, a natural thing, feminist scholar Toril Moi tells us that according to Donna Haraway and Judith Butler, sex “becomes immobile, stable, coherent, fixed, prediscursive, natural, ahistorical” (1999, p. 4).

But clearly/queerly sex is not stable, immobile, natural or ahistorical. Sex is highly historical, contextual/consexual, shifting, unstable. The ways in which we think about sex and gender are deeply historical and our sexed bodies mark culture

as culture marks our bodies. The question becomes, in what ways do we think about sex/gender? In what ways do sex/gender shape identities or limit who we can be or what we can do? I think the key here is to understand how these terms/categories box us in and limit who we are and what we do.

If anything sex/gender serves to regulate and manage, control otherwise out of control bodies. Civilization is discontented and it is civilization that ensures we follow the rules or we become gender outlaws (Bornstein, 1995). Ingraham suggests that "we need to question our assumptions about sex and gender as to how they organize difference, regulate investigations, and preserve particular power relations, especially those linked to institutionalized heterosexuality" (1997, p. 184).

Heteronormativity, the illusion that heterosexuals are the only people on the planet and are the center of all sexual practices, is pervasive even among feminists. Indeed, feminists have been criticized for pretending that debates on gender are heteronormative. Judith Butler remarks that she has "heard feminist scholars . . . in the U.S. worry that gender has been "destroyed" throughout the recent criticisms of feminisms' presumptive heterosexuality" (1997, p. 20). Is gender a useful category? Butler claims it is a copy without an original. Both sex and gender are social constructions as the poststructuralist mantra suggests. Floating signifiers without referents. Gender and sex are confused categories.

Since the 1960s feminists have taken gender to be their primary category of analysis, not sexuality. Engendered bodies seemed to become de-sexed. Arlene Stein and Ken Plummer remark that "feminists began treating gender as a primary lens for understanding problems that did not initially look gender-specific" (1997, p. 135). Feminist scholars tend to agree that whatever gender is, it serves to oppress when it is thought to be something pre-ordained (Moi, 1999; Haraway 1997; Butler 1997; Ingraham 1997; Halberstam, 1998; Miller, 1994). However, part of the problem historically with feminist analyses of gender is the narrowness of inquiry. Many analyze gender as if it is a category-in-itself, for-itself and by-itself. If anything, gender is more like a hybridization, spliced and mixed up with all sorts of subject positions, cultural, historical, racial, national, theoretical. Donna Haraway comments that ultimately gender

is always a relationship, not a preformed category of beings or a possession that one can have. Gender does not pertain more to women than to men. Gender is

the relation between variously constituted categories of men and women (and variously arrayed tropes), differentiated by nation, generation, class, lineage, color and much else. (1997, p. 28)

Gender does not stand alone and to think that it does is to be mistaken. Gender stands in complex relations to sexuality, culture, nation and so forth. Moreover, gender is permeable, shifting. There are many genders, not two. Lynne Miller suggests "androgyny [ambiguous gender] as a construct is in many ways as threatening as effeminate men or masculine women, as it blurs the boundaries of gender" (1994, p. 214). There are also more than two sexes. Herdt (1994) claims that the hermaphrodite constitutes the third sex. Toril Moi tells us that Anne Fausto-Sterling "proposed adding 'herms', 'ferms' and 'merms' to the usual two" (1999, p. 38). Five sexes, imagine that!

As Nina Wakeford (1998) points out that the hybridization and confusion of engendered/sexed bodies continues to proliferate. She tells us that "[bio]boys" (p. 178), "lipstick lesbians" (p. 179), "cyber-dykes" (p. 179), "bio-/transgendered" (p. 178), "boys born boys . . . girls made boys" (177), "female-to-male transsexual[s]" (177), "drag kings" (p. 183), "hasbians" (p. 183) have become all the rage in the gay/lesbian/transgendered/transsexual or queer communities. Further, this intense hybridization has also been noted as a product of cyberspace, computers and information technologies. Cyberspace has altered our identities, relations and ideas about who we think we are or what we think we are. Wakeford points out that

Popular accounts of cyberspace have propagated a 'moral panic' around the presentation of self, or more specifically the misrepresentation of self . . . Reports have suggested that on-line men pretend to be women, women pretend to be men, and heterosexual men try to adopt female personas strategically to attract women who turn out to be other men. (Stone, 1991, (p. 181)

Like this proliferation of confused genders/sexualities, Donna Haraway (1997) introduces the notion of the Femaleman. The femaleman signals the inter-mixing of gender/sexuality beyond identity. She stresses that the quest for purity of gender or sex smacks of the same kind of rhetoric around purity of race. Beware the purity of gender/sexuality!! Homophobia, racism, sexism, xenophobia are born out of the same cloth. It becomes hard to disentangle one from the other; usually they are related kin. What makes some nervous about femaleman is that it becomes difficult to

figure out if it is boy, girl, gay, straight, or even human. Perhaps it is posthuman? Interbreeding is the postmodern.

Paradoxically, gender expectations may not match up with sexed bodies. What you see is not what you get. Genderbending confuses. Gender and sexuality are sliding signifiers warping out of time and space. Jessica Benjamin (1998) suggests that when thinking about gender, and I would add sexuality, it becomes psychologically important to integrate paradoxical understandings and avoid gender polarizations which are the result of a psychological process called splitting. Seeing the world in polar opposites signals regressive emotional, intellectual responses to experiences which are highly complex.

It is easier to see the world in black and white; it is easier psychologically to pretend that gender=sexuality, that the key should fit the lock. But the lock traps the key in a subject position that fixes and reifies. Jessica Benjamin comments that "we have to come to accept the paradoxical status of gender categories, such that they at once fit and contradict our experience, both appear derived from reality and yet spring from the shifting ground of fantasy" (1998, p. 36). Our engendered/sexed bodies are mostly fantasy. We make ourselves up as we go along. Our storied selves can unlock the key to any kind of hybridized creature we wish. It's just that culture will not allow us to perform our sexed bodies in ways that we would like to. Civilization has killed our imagination. And gender/sexed bodies are imagined fictions.

Feminist scholars since the 1990s have sometimes collided head on with a new breed called queer theorists. Recall, since the 1960s the major analytical category for feminists has been gender. For queer theorists, the major analytical category is sex. Judith Butler remarks that "Within queer studies, a methodological distinction has been offered which would distinguish theories of sexuality from theories of gender and, further, allocate theoretical investigations of sexuality to queer studies and the analysis of gender to feminism" (1997, p. 3). Queer theorists have criticized feminists for "subsum[ing] sexuality (and race) under gender" (1997, Stein & Plummer, pp. 136-137). Sexuality cannot be subsumed under these other categories. I believe the best way to treat these categories is inter-relationally. I do not think that queer theorists, on the other hand, should ignore the work done by feminists on gender because without that work, queer theory would not exist. But it does seem to be the case that most queer theorists concentrate on the performance of sexed bodies.

Queer Theory and Education

If gender/sex includes experiences that are queer (the new term for lesbian, bisexual, homosexual, gay, transgendered, transexual) how do educators theorize about queer experience? And why is it important that educators think about queering sex/gender to begin with? Why is queer theory important for teachers? Theory, first of all, provokes thinking and helps articulate difficult and complex experience especially around relationships. Teachers might avoid projecting normalizing pre-judgements onto their students and onto other faculty. Not only this, queer theorizing is crucial because we live in a violent era. Educational discourses around queer theory might help alleviate this violence.

Educational discourses around queer thinking are late to arrive on the scene. Queer theory is already ten years old and other disciplines, especially English and sociology have been grappling with queer subjects for much longer than the discipline of education. But this lag in educational inquiry does not mean that it is too late to begin thinking queerly. Thinking queerly is crucial because teachers may have queer students, may have queer colleagues and may be queer themselves. William F. Pinar remarks,

The appearance of “queer thinking” in the field of education is recent, its formulation in an early stage, even as the political hour feels late. There is an urgency to this work—people are still dying, being bashed, being discriminated against, still suffering unnecessarily, in a myriad of ways, public and private—that demands that we summon our courage, achieve some measure of solidarity and press ahead. (2000, ix)

Education professors have begun to press ahead. Deborah Britzman (1998), Alice Pitt (1998), Jim Sears (1990; 1998), Susan Talburt (2000), Shirley Steinberg (2000), William Pinar (1998; 2000), Brent Davis and Dennis Sumara (2000), Dennis Carlson (1998), Nelson Rodriguez (1998), Jonanthan Silin (1995), Mary Doll (1998), William Tierney and Patrick Dilley (1998), Suzanne de Castell and Mary Bryson (1998) to name but a few, have all done work on queer theory and education.

Queer theory, as I mentioned earlier, arrived on the scene around 1990. The term queer is used politically. Once the ultimate insult, now the term queer is reappropriated and thrown back in the face of the oppressor. Queer is an umbrella term that seeks to undo oppressive gender/sex desig-

nations. Queer is related to performance and desire.

More specifically, queer arrived on the scene at the site of the AIDS crisis. Commentators seem to agree that queer theory signals a shift from earlier gay and lesbian liberation work during the 1970s (Sears, 1998; Tierney & Dilley 1998; Seidman, 1997; Carlson, 1998; Stein & Plummer, 1997). The gay and lesbian movement of the 1970s was modeled on “civil rights strategies” (Stein & Plummer, 1997, p. 134). The key themes of the movement were liberation, normalcy and attaining rights. The Gay/lesbian community seemed to be saying we are normal, we are just like straight people. William Tierney and Patrick Dilley comment that “The 1970s saw a rise in . . . research that looked at lesbian and gay people not as deviant, but as “normal” or quasi-normal. This line of research primarily began after the Stonewall riots in a New York City bar in 1969, and after the American Psychological Association (APA) removed homosexuality as a form of mental disorders in 1973” (1998, p. 52).

Unlike the gay and lesbian liberation movement of the 1970s, the queer movement has grown tired of being nice, especially in the face of AIDS and homophobic backlash. Queer thinking and activism is angry, in-your-face, fed up with do-nothing responses to AIDS. Queer thinking is parody, acting out, acting up, rude, ludic performance (Morris, 1997; 1998; 2000). The over-riding theme of queer theory is difference, we are not like you and do not want to be like normal people. However, Michael Warner (1999) points out that there is a strain within the queer movement that still embraces “the lure of the normal” (p. 61). The lure of the normal haunts queers in the form of gay marriage. Warner argues that the concept of marriage is straight and gays who want to marry want to imitate straight people to become more like them.

There is also a strain in queer life that has been dubbed the new gay right (I would not call these people queer at all). These gay Pat Robertson clones want to pass for straight, have all the power and privilege of straight people and also propagate misogyny, racism and xenophobia. I don’t usually associate gay people with being bigots, but they do exist and it is very disturbing. Judith Butler remarks “In a recent article in the Village Voice, Richard Goldstein warns against the anti-feminism accompanying the rise of the gay conservatives to power positions within the queer movement” (1997, p. 29). The queer movement was begun by queer left radicals, not gay conservatives. If anything, the

queer movement marks stresses and strains of social antagonisms and is not a monolithic entity. Judith Halberstam (1998) contends that stone butch dykes are queer and radical, but she points out that Teresa de Lauretis claims that women who act like men are not radical at all because they are simply imitating men.

I have heard many in the queer community remark that transexuals are not queer because they realign their anatomies to fit in and become normal. According to Alice Pitt (1998), Monique Wittig claims that lesbians are not really women after all because they don’t play the game with men. Lesbians are not part of the heterosexual world, therefore, they are not women. But then what are women?

Joshua Gamson (1997) says “some lesbian writers point out that it [queer] is likely to become synonymous with white gay male” (p. 403), when in fact queer was coined by Teresa de Lauretis. It is oh so like men to appropriate women’s terms. Gay men have always had more power within the gay/lesbian movement because after all we do live in patrio-het-archy.

Some older gays and lesbians think the word queer stupid and insulting. So queer also signals a generational divide.

Erica Meiners comments that queer might also signal a kind of elitism in the movement. She says that “the elitism in queerness and queer theorizing is not new . . . Scholars have pointed to the whiteness of queer theory as an extension of the whiteness of mainstream of GLBT [gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered]” (1998, p. 125).

Steven Epstein comments that to “many sociologists, queer theory suggests this month’s trendiness” (1997, p. 145). Some argue that queer theorists are too theoretical and that they do not pay enough attention to real life issues (Halberstam, 1998; Stein & Plummer, 1997).

Some complain that queer identities (which are shifting, vague, illusory) have destroyed identity-politics and do not therefore help win rights because it becomes difficult to pin down what the group queer signifies in the first place (Warner, 1999; Epstein, 1997; Gamson, 1997). Joshua Gamson writes that,

As long as membership in this group is unclear, minority status, and therefore rights and protection is unavailable. Built into the queer debates, then, is a fundamental quandary: in the contemporary American political environment, clear identity categories are both necessary and dangerous distortions. (1997, p. 410)

In the 1970s, identity-politics did not seem to be as troubled as it is today because the lesbian/gay movement, for the

most part, embraced essentialized notions of “lesbian” and “gay.” Moving alongside postmodern and poststructuralist theorizing, queer theory no longer embraces essentialist categories. Queer signifies movement, desire and performance. And this shape shifting signifier makes it difficult politically to rally together as a group with a solid identity. Queer terrain is anything but stable. However, there are some overriding agreements as to what queer theory is. Ellis Hanson remarks that

The aims of queer theory are at once philosophical, political, and erotic—an effort, indeed at blurring any distinction between them—since it seeks not only to analyze but also to resist, dismantle, or circumnavigate hegemonic systems of sexual oppression and normalization by revealing the theoretical presumptions and rhetorical slights of hand by which they establish, justify, and reinforce their considerable power. (1999, p. 4)

Queer theory is not about liberation, it is about opposition and resistance to normalizing, medicalizing, reifying discourse and social practices. Queer theory is performance, it is at once funny and angry, serious and silly. Its aim is to loosen up the sex=gender paradigm. Sex does not equal gender. And because the field of queer theory is only ten years young, scholars are still trying to figure out what it is and what it is not, how it may be expressed, articulated and thought about. Queer theory is about inclusion, contradiction, paradox. Queer theory is about competing narratives and entertaining the unthinkable. It is about recognizing that we often misrecognize each other because of projections, expectations, and pre-judgments around the notions of gender and sex. Queer performance is slippery.

Queer Life and School Culture

The mayor's been shot. No, Harvey Milk's been shot. They've both been shot? Are they dead? With the Jonestown mass suicide only nine days behind them, the news people ask the obvious question: Is this the work of the People's Temple hit squad? (Shilts, 1982, xv)

The year was 1978. Harvey Milk, perhaps the most famous public official in San Francisco, and Mayor George Moscone had been brutally murdered by Dan White. White's infamous “twinkie defense” (Shilts, 1982, p. 317) proved successful. He was charged with voluntary manslaughter and sentenced to less than five years in prison. Dan White literally got away with murder. Riots on Castro Street ensued.

In 1978 I was a sophomore in high

school in San Diego. Harvey Milk, San Francisco's first gay supervisor, was murdered in my home state. I am embarrassed to admit now that I did not even know who Harvey Milk was in 1978 and I do not remember the killing. What I do remember is Jonestown. I only learned about Harvey Milk and Castro Street after I entered college in 1980. Not remembering this event signals to me terrific repression. I was not out in high school. I didn't even dare think about being queer. It was simply unthinkable. And certainly, high school was not the place for me to come out.

Perhaps remaining closeted was my own unconscious way of protecting myself. I had no clue about my sexuality. My high school was a rampantly Christian fundamentalist, right wing looney bin. I do not know how many times reborn Christians tried to save me from being Jewish. Dealing with my Jewish identity was really tough and so of course coming out was out of the question. I could not psychologically handle both. Why did I not know who Harvey Milk was? Because I could not psychologically identify with anyone who was gay. That was too dangerous. At least, this is my analysis today. Gerald Unks tells us that,

The high school—the center of most adolescent life and culture—stands staunchly aloof and rigidly resistant to even a suggestion that any of its faculty or student body might be homosexual or that homosexuals deserve anything but derision and scorn within its walls. High schools may be the most homophobic institutions in American society. (cited in Rodriguez, 1998, p. 177)

Not only is high school culture not tolerant of queers, coming out may be outright dangerous. Exactly twenty years after supervisor Harvey Milk was shot to death, Matthew Shepard, a young school boy, was murdered. Queers risk everything by being out. This young boy's brutal and needless death points to the importance of not sweeping queer students under the rug. School culture is somehow complicit, not only in intolerance, but in violence and even murder. Coming out, or staying closeted damages young people. It is a no-win situation. Part of the reason young people do not come out is that school life is a site of “sexual fascism” (Rodriguez, 1998, p. 177). Nelson Rodriguez comments that “Indeed, combining heterosexism with schooling is an insidious way of educating youth to promote “sexual fascism”; no doubt it is part of the moral rights’ “hidden curriculum” (p. 177).

Family values is a code word for moral majority heteronormativity. Family values

means straight kids do right, be right and fight for the right. Family values institutionalizes homophobia and makes it seem alright. I am a product of a moral majority public high school culture. Being deeply closeted was a way to protect myself. Repressed sexualities can lead down treacherous paths. But I was lucky because my first year in college I did come out. Carnegie-Mellon provided the kind of atmosphere that allowed me to be me. The music conservatory at CMU was a place where I could be queer. But some people never find a place where they can come out and so repression rules. Elenie Opffer tells us that,

Harbeck (1992) points out that the department of Health and Human Services estimates that of the 5,000 annual suicides of youths between the ages of 15 and 24, up to 30% may be attributed to sexual preference issues and societal disapproval of homosexuality. (1994, p. 298)

School culture, a reflection of society at large, is complicit in kids' suicides. Repressed sexualities return in all sorts of bizarre manifestations. Perhaps it is shame that drives kids to desperation. Shame turns to self-hatred. Michael Warner comments that “Almost all children grow up in families that think of themselves as heterosexual, and for some children this problem [creates a] . . . profound and nameless estrangement, a sense of inner secrets and hidden shame” (1999, p. 8). Secrets and shame follow children into adult life. Queer lives are always already secretive. You can't be out all the time. Secrets become necessary for survival. Who to tell, who not to tell. Do I tell my students? What if they ask? Queer students grow up and some of them, like me, become queer teachers, professors. Then what? Susanne Luhmann comments that

Immense moral panics erupt over the discovery that lesbians and gays educate our children. Intense, sometimes even violent, contestations occur over the curricular inclusion of the study of sexuality in general, and of lesbian and gay content in particular. (1998, p. 142)

Queer teachers, queer students. What is the moral majority to do? We're here, we're queer, get used to it. Queer teachers and queer students have to live in a tricky culture, one that demands closets, secrets, shame. Being queer against the backdrop of heteronormativity is difficult and dangerous. Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard attest to this along with the unnamed others who are victims of gay bashing, homophobia.

Heteronormativity takes all shapes

and forms as it intersects with homophobia. These two terms go hand in hand. Homophobia can be overt or it can be subtle. Recently taking a new position at Georgia Southern University, many people would ask, is Mary going too? Imagine that we were a straight couple, nobody would ask that sort of question. A realtor called to relocate us in Savannah. She asked Mary "what does your HUSBAND do?" Huh? Why even assume that a woman is married to a man? And when Mary proceeded to tell the realtor that we were queer, she said, "oh I've got the perfect spot for you, right off the interstate." That's a good place to deposit queers. NOT. Perhaps she would like to see us splattered on the interstate? It is amazing to me that many people do not recognize us as a real couple. Two women?

These normalizing gestures begin very early, perhaps when we are still children. Schooling plays a large role-normalizing sexuality and gender. Boys are supposed to play football, girls are supposed to be cheerleaders. Heteronormativity scripts roles that schooling enforces. Even subject matter is heteronormative. Boys are supposed to be good in math, girls in English. Part of the reason I could never do math is because I had a math teacher in elementary school who treated me as if I were stupid. So of course I believed him. I talked myself out of doing math for life. I am sure other girls experience this as well.

But one of the things I was good at was kickball. When I came to homeplate the boys would move back and yell, "Back up! Morris is on." My sister warned me that if I continued to kick better than the boys, I'd never get a boyfriend. But I never wanted one to begin with. I got lectures on tomboyism from my sister and my mother. "Don't you want to go to the prom?" My mother asked when I was in high school. I said, what for? I really did not understand the concept of the prom. I do remember, though, that prom night there was an earthquake. Shake em up!! I was out with Kristine prom night and we talked about her acceptance to Harvard and mine to Carnegie-Mellon. We had more important things to do than go to the prom. The prom, though, is a whole discourse of heteronormativity and serves to oppress those who are different, other, queer. Straight life=prom night. A life that I have never lived.

Judith Halberstam (1998) comments on the problematics of tomboyism. She says, "Tomboyism is tolerated as long as the child remains prepubescent, as soon as puberty begins, however the full force of gender conformity descends on the girl" (1998, p. 6). I refused to conform. I played

with baseball bats and GI Joes. Now I don't get teased because of acting like a tomboy, but people often mistake me for a boy, and most often for someone's son. I've been mistaken for Ted Aoki's son, Bill Pinar's son, Mary Doll's son, everybody's son in general. At thirty eight I am the world's son. But I'm nobody's son. And certainly I don't have a son. Never will.

I suggest that educators work to queer school. Queering school means throwing into question sedimented, rigid gender/sexuality categories. The queer thing about gender and sexuality is that we don't really know what these categories are. We don't even know why we talk like this. Some cultures don't even have words for gender. The paradox about outing one's queerness is that it can at once lift repression but at the same time can create a dangerous situation. Coming out can result in the Harvey Milk story or the Matthew Shepard story. It is up to educators to change these stories.

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