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Teacher Candidates as LGBTQ and Social Justice Advocates through Curricular Action
De futurs enseignants défenseurs des droits de la communauté LGBTQ et de la justice sociale grâce à l'action pédagogique

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Article abstract

Critical challenges facing teacher educators at faculties of education is how to prepare teacher candidates to see schools situated in larger social contexts and support their ongoing learning as social justice advocates. Anti-oppressive work that challenges the marginalization of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Two-Spirited, Queering and/or Questioning (LGBTQ) youth is critical to this work. The purpose of this paper is twofold, first to understand the impact of the Positive Space program on teacher candidates' reasons and abilities to act as allies and social justice advocates. Second, we explore the process of teacher candidates becoming knowledgeable, empowered, and action-oriented for, with, and as LGBTQ community members and the ways they challenge heteronormativity and the gender binary through the formal and informal curriculum.

TEACHER CANDIDATES AS LGBTQ AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATES THROUGH CURRICULAR ACTION

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ABSTRACT. Critical challenges facing teacher educators at faculties of education is how to prepare teacher candidates to see schools situated in larger social contexts and support their ongoing learning as social justice advocates. Anti-oppressive work that challenges the marginalization of Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Two-Spirited, Queering and/or Questioning (LGBTQ) youth is critical to this work. The purpose of this paper is twofold, first to understand the impact of the Positive Space program on teacher candidates' reasons and abilities to act as allies and social justice advocates. Second, we explore the process of teacher candidates becoming knowledgeable, empowered, and action-oriented for, with, and as LGBTQ community members and the ways they challenge heteronormativity and the gender binary through the formal and informal curriculum.

DE FUTURS ENSEIGNANTS DÉFENSEURS DES DROITS DE LA COMMUNAUTÉ LGBTQ ET DE LA JUSTICE SOCIALE GRÂCE À L'ACTION PÉDAGOGIQUE

RÉSUMÉ. Les enseignants des facultés en éducation font face à des défis fondamentaux en ce qui a trait à la préparation des futurs enseignants. Comment les amener à voir l'école comme une partie intégrante de contextes sociaux plus vastes ? Comment favoriser leur apprentissage constant comme défenseurs des droits sociaux ? Les approches anti-oppressives qui remettent en question la marginalisation des jeunes lesbiennes, gais, bisexuels, transgenres et queer ou en questionnement (LGBTQ) sont au centre de cette recherche. Cet article a deux visées. Tout d'abord, celui-ci clarifie l'impact du programme Positive Space sur les motivations et habiletés des futurs enseignants à agir comme alliés et défenseurs de la justice sociale. Nous y explorons également le processus vécu par les futurs enseignants pour devenir plus compréhensifs, responsables et orientés vers l'action pour, avec et en tant que membres de la communauté LGBTQ. Nous examinons aussi la manière dont ils remettent en question l'hétéronormativité et la conception binaire des genres via les programmes formels et informels.

One of the critical challenges facing teacher educators at faculties of education is how to prepare teacher candidates to see schools situated in larger social contexts and support their ongoing learning as social justice advocates. Anti-oppressive work that challenges the marginalization of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Two-Spirited, Queering and/or Questioning (LGBTQ)[1] youth continues to be "a challenge in teacher education, worldwide" (Clark, 2010, p. 704) as many future teachers are not prepared to address "issues of homophobia and heterosexism in the classroom" (Stiegler, 2008, p. 117); some "respond to calls for anti-oppressive education with resistance, defensiveness, and fear" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 9). In response to this challenge, we have purposefully created space for "LGBTQ-inclusive teaching and intersectionality" (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 21), as part of mandatory courses for all teacher candidates in our Bachelor of Education (B. Ed.) program at Saint Francis Xavier University (STFX). The opportunity for teacher candidates to understand how to incorporate anti-discrimination work in their teaching practice is a key component of school and educational reform. Social justice policies and procedures exist in many school settings, but unless new teachers have the opportunity to explore and apply their grounded knowledge from professional development, these well-meaning policies are often neglected or ignored.

Building upon our ongoing longitudinal study (Kearns, Mitton-Kükner, & Tompkins, 2014a; Kearns, Mitton-Kükner, & Tompkins, 2014b; Mitton-Kükner, Kearns, & Tompkins, 2016) which investigates the impact of an integrated LGBTQ awareness-raising and ally-building program, Positive Space, as part of compulsory foundations courses (EDUC 433: Sociology of Education and EDUC 435: Inclusion I), we now focus on the experiences of teacher candidates who identified as LGBTQ and social justice advocates. They participated in Positive Space I and II workshops, and further volunteered to take on a leadership role by completing an additional 5-hour "train the trainer" professional development workshop. The purpose of this article is to understand the impact of the Positive Space program on teacher candidates' reasons and abilities to act as allies and social justice advocates. We were also interested to explore the process of teacher candidates becoming knowledgeable, empowered, and action-oriented for, with, and as LGBTQ community members and the ways they challenge heteronormativity and the gender binary through the formal and informal curriculum.

Broader context of the study

In a 3-year study (2009-2011) involving over 3,700 Canadian teens in public schools, educational institutions are portrayed as problematic spaces for LGBTQ youth, with high levels of harassment, both verbal and physical, and harmful consequences (Taylor et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2011). Of particular importance, Taylor et al. (2011) noted the lack of alignment between official school curriculum with its emphasis on human rights and diversity and the curricula of particular places in schools, such as hallways, where LGBTQ students

feel unsafe and/or harassed. Arguably, heteronormative curricula continue to marginalize a non-heterosexual minority. Incorporating social justice teaching practices in all school spaces and engaging with curriculum critically are key components of effective school and educational reform (Kumashiro, 2002; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012; Solomon, Singer, Campbell, & Allen, 2011). In our ongoing research of teacher candidates, we are cognizant that both social justice and critical curriculum content need to be present in pre-service education if classrooms and hallways are going to be changed for the acceptance of learners, and their families, who identify as LGBTQ.

Locally and globally, schools mirror broader structures of power. Through the Positive Space program and coursework, we highlight the ways discrimination is manifested systematically through moral and legal discourse. We remind teacher candidates of how important it is to be aware of heterosexual privilege, and the harassment and discrimination many people from the LGBTQ community experience worldwide. In some countries laws are in place to "imprison, physically punish, commit to asylums, or even kill people presumed to be LGBTQ" (Eichler, 2010, p. 89). Examples of discrimination are numerous: from Russia's stance towards LGBTQ individuals at the 2014 Olympics, to recent research that highlights the lack of tolerance many countries, particularly African and predominantly Muslim nations (Careaga & Yamashita, 2013; The Pew Research Center, 2013), have towards LGBTQ individuals.

Upon first glance, this may seem to be more of a problem for teacher candidates who decide to teach in international settings; however, we note the lack of legislative agreement about LGBTQ learners across Canadian schools. For example, in Nova Scotia, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development has released new guidelines to help members of school communities support transgender and gender non-conforming students (Willick, 2014). In stark contrast, the province of Alberta put on hold a bill that would allow students of the LGBTQ community and allies to form support groups (Gay Straight Alliances[2]) within their schools ("Gay Youth Bill Delayed," 2014). The proposed bill has experienced much controversy in Alberta ("Gay-Straight Alliance Bill for Schools," 2014). Only recently has the province revisited it with a proposal for an amendment that would allow GSAs in schools ("Alberta Government Reverses Stance," 2015). This is alarming given the strong evidence that GSAs are "key components of a safe school environment for LGBTQ students" (Taylor et al., 2009, p. 49).

The Canadian context: Faculties of education, pre-service teacher education and LGBTQ inclusion

Overall, in Canada, there is policy to support the preparation of teacher candidates to teach for equity and diversity in faculties of education. The Association of Canadian Deans of Education (2009), in their *Accord on Initial Teacher Education* has stated that "an effective, initial teacher education

program promotes diversity, inclusion, understanding, acceptance and social responsibility" (p. 4). When looking to find material for preparing pre-service educators to teach specifically about the LGBTQ community, there is support. For example, there is ample material on LGBTQ history and individual and systemic oppression in schools and society (Alberta Government, 2016; British Columbia Teachers' Federation, n.d.; New Brunswick LGBTQ Inclusive Education Resource, n.d.; Ontario Teachers' Federation, 2014; Province of Nova Scotia, 2014).

However, as Taylor et al. (2011) explained, generic statements such as "teaching for equity and diversity" or "addressing all learners" that are part of mission statements for teacher education programs fall short of signaling explicitly to teacher educators and, consequently, pre-service teachers that LGBTQ experiences and realities need to be included in the curriculum. Bellini (2012) found that the Ontario College of Teacher's documents "seem to leave too much room for faculties of education to avoid discussion of LGBTQ issues — and once again assume it is someone else's responsibility" (p. 391).

In Nova Scotia, the development of Ministry documents and policy related to LGBTQ education has been uneven. In 2002, LGBTQ issues were subsumed under the province's Racial Equity Policy (Province of Nova Scotia, 2002) which, while providing an important and necessary framework for anti-oppressive teaching, did not provide explicit or adequate articulation strategies to challenge anti-homophobia and anti-transphobia in schools. The provincial teachers' organization demonstrated leadership by creating an Equity Committee in 2005 and an Ad Hoc Committee in 2006 mandated to advocate for LGBTQ teachers and students. This provided teacher leadership in professional development and public awareness around LGBTQ education (Mitton-Kükner et al., 2016). In 2013, one union local of the teachers' organization recommended that the Ministry of Education produce a policy on how schools could be inclusive of transgender students. The Ministry responded by producing guidelines (Province of Nova Scotia, 2014) rather than a policy, which was considerably less in its impact.

In spite of well-meaning attempts, we know that students in public schools in Canada continue to experience environments that are hostile to LGBTQ students and their families. LGBTQ students and students who have family members who belong to the LGBTQ community still experience higher feelings of being unsafe and experience verbal and sometimes physical hostility (Taylor et al., 2011). Bellini (2012) has reminded us that the rhetoric about *wanting* schools to be safe places for all students is easily found, yet homophobic and transphobic bullying remains widely documented. We maintain that in order to combat such systemic and discriminatory school climates, teacher candidates need to be provided with learning opportunities that will inform their understanding of and increase their confidence in opening up the curriculum to include LGBTQ experiences and realities. Gillies (2016) asserted that teachers

> must include the LGBTQ experience…through the curriculum…. Students decipher what society values…by mastering the content that is presented in schools. Students don't look to their school's mission statements, inspirational posters, or posted classroom rules for guidance. They look to instruction (p. 224).

Indeed, faculties of education can foster teacher candidates' understandings and competencies to address homophobic and transphobic issues and to challenge heteronormativity in schools (Taylor et al., 2009; 2011).

A look at the literature suggests that many teacher education programs in Canada and elsewhere are still not preparing pre-service teachers to bring LGBTQ issues into their practice. Kitchen and Bellini (2012) found evidence that faculties of education in Canada and the United States do little to "address making schools safe for LGBTQ students in their course outlines, although it is hard to determine how much this is addressed by individual instructors" (p. 448). In a survey of 150 Ontario teachers, Schneider and Dimito (2008) noted that respondents "reported little formal training or opportunities for professional development regarding LGBT issues…information about effective strategies was identified as a need" (p. 67). Kitchen and Bellini's (2012) research revealed not only the absence of any exposure to LGBTQ issues in teacher education programs, but also the presence of homophobic and transphobic attitudes among teacher candidates. Similarly, one study set in Australia observed that many

> [pre-service teachers] believed that sexuality was an issue for parents not schools; that there was no need to learn about LGBTQ issues as all teenagers and educators in schools are straight; and that LGBTQ students often had mental health problems. (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008 p. 445)

The gap between the espoused belief that teachers can make a difference in interrupting heteronormativity and the gender binary in schools and the apparent lack of any preparation for pre-service teachers to engage in LGBTQ education is perplexing. It left Bellini (2012) to claim: "it is absolutely puzzling that the one institution in charge of educating society's citizens to be responsible and respectful is one of the most homophobic" (p. 382).

Teacher candidates need to understand the curriculum is not static nor it is a stand-alone document handed to them from their Ministry of Education. There are many forms of curriculum — the formal, informal, hidden, and null (what is not taught) — all of which serve to communicate to LGBTQ students and all other students whether they belong or not in schools. Sapp (2016) asserted, "curriculum is not 'it' — an object to be mastered, but a 'Thou' — a subject so deeply and intimately connected to the teacher that students see them as one" (p. 125). Butler Wall et al. (2016) reminded us of the courage and passion it takes to be an educator that sees various forms of curricula as places of agency and hope:

> Educators and scholars of color have argued for many years that multicultural education means moving beyond "heroes and holidays" to integrating the history and lives of people of color into curriculum at every point. The same is true for LGBTQ issues and people. Participating in the Day of Silence can be a good start, but a social justice frame demands an approach to curriculum that integrates queer people — their problems, history, struggles, and contributions — into day-to-day curriculum, K-12, across the subject areas. (p. 25)

LGBTQ education within teacher education programs could and sometimes does equip teacher candidates to do better at creating truly inclusive and equitable learning environments. Through our research, we are identifying possibilities of what might be done to create such opportunities for LGBTQ learners in schools.

The Positive Space program

The Positive Space program was created in 2003 in a unique partnership between the university and a women's resource center to create safe and positive environments for LGBTQ community members. It uses a feminist framework that articulates the interlocking nature of oppressions. In 2003, the Positive Space program focused almost solely on sexual orientation diversity and challenging heteronormativity and homophobia. As time passed, awareness of transgender and genderism increased, and more focus was placed on challenging of transphobia, cis-gender privilege, and the gender binary in schools. In our role as teacher educators, all three of us have completed the Positive Space program and have gone on to become Positive Space program trainers within our faculty, the wider university, and with teachers throughout the province.

Since 2009, the Positive Space program has been embedded in two mandatory 9-week Year 1 foundation courses (EDUC 433: Sociology of Education and EDUC 435: Inclusion 1) for all elementary and secondary pre-service teachers. We feel that nesting the Positive Space program in these particular courses which focus on equity and inclusion increases the uptake by our pre-service teachers.

> These courses focus upon issues of power and privilege, interlocking forms of oppression, and inclusive education. Due to the content and pedagogical approach of these courses, pre-service teachers are familiar with concepts in social justice education, such as power, privilege, cultural capital, critical thinking, and individual, institutional, and systemic forms of oppression. We note the importance of these courses in supporting pre-service teachers' understanding of the Positive Space program training program. (Mitton-Kükner et al., 2016, p. 20)

Elsewhere, we have described in detail the elements of the Positive Space program (Kearns et al., 2014a; Kearns et al., 2014b; Mitton-Kükner et al., 2016). A brief description is included here:

> Positive Space I is a two and a half-hour workshop entitled "Awareness and Terminology" that invites pre-service educators to explore LGBTQ realities and examine language, marginalization, and consider ways to be responsive and responsible in schools. Positive Space II is a two and a half-hour workshop entitled "LGBTQ Oppression and Becoming an Ally" that deepens understanding of homophobia and transphobia in schools and communities, explores how to interrupt them, and considers LGBTQ representation in curricula. (Mitton-Kükner et al., 2016, p. 21)

Following completion of the program, pre-service teachers are invited to reflect upon their understanding of and their willingness to be allies. If they accept, they receive stickers to display and buttons to wear to signal their advocacy role and desire to be supportive of all youth, and challenge heteronormativity and cis-gender privilege.

The enthusiasm of our pre-service teachers towards Positive Space I and II has led us to create more levels of the program. Positive Space III explicitly models how curricular connections can be made to LGBTQ experiences and perspectives. Since 2013, we have also offered an optional 5-hour Positive Space IV Train the Trainer session to allow pre-service teachers the opportunity to become Positive Space facilitators.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Kumashiro (2002) held that anti-oppressive pedagogy requires knowledge that challenges frameworks which privilege some and marginalize others. For educators, this is not simply about more awareness or knowledge, but recognition of the need to disrupt oppressive frameworks. Mainstream knowledge is constructed as a social norm, making it difficult to see that it is neither neutral nor value-free. Hence, it is often hard to recognize how heteronormativity, for example, is normalized in schools and (re)inscribed at a curricular level. Challenging oppression requires that heteronormativity be named and troubled. Opening up school spaces to difference is not only a matter of "civil rights" but encompasses "redefinitions of the family, public economies of affection and representations, and the right for the everyday not organized by violence, exclusion, medicalization, criminalization and erasure" (Britzman,1995, p. 152). In this way, we encourage teacher candidates to question existing knowledge, interrupt dominant power relations, and endeavor to use anti-oppressive pedagogical strategies.

We draw upon the conceptual framework of safe, positive, and queering moments in anti-oppressive work (Goldstein, Russell, & Daley, 2007) to name three different types of approaches teacher candidates might employ and experience in schools with regard to challenging LGBTQ oppression; this includes curriculum content which acknowledges LGBTQ identities. The first (safe) uses a human rights discourse that speaks to everyone's right to equality,

the second (positive) moves beyond tolerance and actively affirms members of the LGBTQ community, and the third space (queering) seeks to challenge heteronormativity itself.

It is clear that a number of issues need to be addressed to challenge heteronormativity and the gender binary and to bring about school transformation. Whether one uses a safe, positive, or queering framework (Goldstein et al., 2007), or employs one or all of three major paradigms of safety, equity, and critical theory (Szalacha, 2004), the examination of school curricula that normalizes heterosexuality is a challenge. Teacher resistance to such anti-oppressive pedagogy has been documented to be an issue (Kumashiro, 2002; Robinson & Ferfolia, 2008). This creates certain tensions for teacher educators to both prepare teacher candidates for schools as they exist, while empowering them to change classrooms and schools into more imaginative, inclusive, and educative places.

METHODOLOGY & METHODS

The qualitative research design (Merriam, 2009) for this ongoing multi-year study is focused upon the impact of Positive Space training on teacher candidates' knowledge of and capabilities to purposefully create inclusive spaces for LGBTQ youth and allies in schools. This article focuses upon conversations with nine teacher candidates who had completed over 10 hours of Positive Space training. The conversations explored what meaning they attributed to the program and its influence upon their experience during field experiences in schools. We believe that "voices count" (Kuhl, 2014). Too frequently, the voices of pre-service teachers are unsolicited or unheard. We are a faculty with a history of social justice teaching (Tompkins & Orr, 2009) and we feel the need to listen carefully to how our pre-service teachers navigate translating social justice theory into action. Qualitative methods allow us to focus on the lived experiences and narratives that people produce with the aim of understanding how people make sense of such experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Grace and Benson (2000) highlighted the importance of using narrative in queering education as a way to connect the "personal, the political and the pedagogical in classroom spaces" (p. 89). Thus, we consciously aimed to infuse critical social justice literacy (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012) and critical narrative (Kuhl, 2014) into our methods. We conducted a series of focus group interviews during the winter of 2014. We chose to conduct focus group interviews as the primary method of data collection, as all participants had knowledge of the topic (inclusion of the LGBTQ community in schools), had completed Positive Space training, and had the opportunity to implement what they had learned into their teaching practices while on field experience in schools. This series of focus group interviews enabled us to consider the meaning this group of teacher candidates had constructed (Merriam, 2009) about the relevance of our program and its influence upon their teaching practices. It further allowed

them to share its impact on their identities as allies and social justice advocates, and their reasons for seeking additional training in order to become Positive Space trainers themselves.

Following successful completion of the Positive Space program in the fall of 2013, and after having completed 16 weeks of field experience, three focus group interviews were conducted between January and March 2014 with nine teacher candidates. Pseudonyms are used for all participants: four participants, Donald, Carl, Kathy, and Rosemary, identified as LGBTQ, and five, Beth, Anne, Virginia, Gillian and Jane, identified as cisgender heterosexual (CH). All of the participants identified as allies and/or advocates for the LGBTQ community. The interviews ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length and were digitally recorded for accurate transcription. Participants were invited to reflect and describe the challenges or successes they experienced in identifying and addressing homophobia / transphobia in schools and to consider their actions as allies.

We separately analyzed the transcriptions of these interviews using Goldstein et al.'s (2007) conceptualization of safe, positive, and queering spaces. As part of individual analysis, we repeatedly analyzed the transcripts in order to identify recurring patterns for the purposes of code identification and theme development (Merriam, 2009). Following individual analysis, we met and discussed codes for repeated patterns in the data. Themes were then developed based upon code frequency and evident data to support our conclusions. The themes were connected to the impact of the Positive Space training program upon teacher candidates' understanding of the ally and social justice work they have done and can do in schools. This series of interviews enabled us to consider the meaning this group of teacher candidates had constructed about the relevance of Positive Space training upon their teaching practices and identities as allies and social justice advocates, and their influence upon their curricular practices in and outside of the classroom.

FINDINGS

Participants described the training as giving them a deeper sense of agency for what they can do in their classrooms through curricular means and what they can collaboratively do with others in the larger school community. In the analysis of the interviews, we found that all participants reported increased awareness of the LGBTQ community in schools, attempted to approach their interactions with students mindful of gender orientation, gender expression, as well as sexual orientation when deemed appropriate, and felt the training should remain a program expectation for teacher candidates in the program. Overall, participants demonstrated that they were aware of informal and formal curricular opportunities in schools where they might employ or had employed a range of strategies in their efforts to be inclusive of the LGBTQ community.

Here, we focus on those themes that emerged from the data: 1) reclaiming the informal curriculum; 2) seizing formal curriculum opportunities; 3) identifying as leaders in strategic curriculum spaces for the LGBTQ community; and 4) witnessing social justice practices enacted in curricular spaces.

Reclaiming the informal curriculum

Previously, we noted the impact of Positive Space training upon teacher candidates' understanding of the importance of creating inclusive spaces in schools for youth who identify as LGBTQ (Kearns et al., 2014a; Mitton-Kükner et al., 2015). One of the challenges in our work with teacher candidates is to have them move beyond a reactive stance of intervention to a more proactive stance of educative interruption. While we acknowledge the importance of pre- and in-service teachers being able to intervene and respond to moments of discrimination, we also attempt to foster an understanding that inclusion of LGBTQ can happen through an active pedagogical stance and through formal inclusive curricular action.

Participants reported that the training imparted a sense of empowerment, enabling them to pedagogically engage LGBTQ curricula with purpose and confidence. One pre-service teacher, Rosemary described the way the training informed how she approached moments in the classroom, making use of instances that allowed her to broaden student understanding of gender. She said: "through this training…I feel empowered…little things like the language used especially in elementary, like 'boys go here', 'girls go here'…subtle things like…. I changed the way I was addressing [the class]" (Rosemary, Focus group interview, March 6, 2014). In another instance, when giving students a choice of books, some that may be "stereotypically" characterized as male, female, or neutral, Rosemary was sure to say to the students, "none of these books are specifically for girls or boys. You can pick whatever book you want to pick." She further credited the training for "understanding…those little tiny interruptions…subtle things make a difference." More explicitly, Rosemary also said, "if you hear somebody talking shit…don't just ignore it because it's easy. You stop it and you educate and you explain why those words are hurtful" (Rosemary, Focus group interview, March 6, 2014).

Reportedly for Rosemary, the Positive Space training program had an impact upon her use of language and interactions with the elementary students she taught during field experience. Rosemary's comments seem to suggest that she understood the influence of informal curricula upon children's understanding of gender and that it was important for her to emphasize inanimate items, like books, as un-gendered.

Rosemary's emphasis on subtle actions as important in the education of children, particularly their developing awareness of gender orientation and expression, was echoed by other elementary teacher candidates who saw the informal curricula of classroom life as opportunities for making this happen.

Donald explained:

> the Positive Space program has sort of showed us…it's through subtle ways, especially at the elementary level, that you can change or you can help students to see things in a different way…. At the primary level in this past practicum, [I emphasized] colors [and gender expression]…making sure I was switching it up and being mindful that colors didn't really matter [in terms of gender identity and expression]…. Students have their own favorite colors…even holding hands at that age and telling them "yes, boys can hold hands with boys and the same with girls." It's just through those simple conversations that I think change can really happen. (Donald, Focus group interview, March 6, 2014)

Similar to Rosemary, Donald emphasized the importance of ongoing subtle messages regarding the gender education of children and giving choices about the activities in which they might engage. Both felt they had the opportunity to make a difference in the field at the elementary level, particularly in their efforts to broaden student understanding of gender, as a state of being full of possibilities.

Seizing formal curriculum opportunities

In our program, teacher candidates are encouraged to see opportunities for the integration of social justice as part of the formal curriculum. One of our participants, Carl, who identified as gay in the second year of the program, talked about being affirmed and prepared to bring this work into the classroom by both the "physical and non-physical resources that [he has] gotten from all three sessions [of the training]" (Carl, Focus group interview, March 6, 2014). Carl continued to explain that he felt "incredible" in terms of how his Grade 12 history class unfolded in a unit he called "the pursuit of justice." Carl explained that he used "case studies" in his class and "went through different justice issues with the civil rights movement…women's rights…[and] Aboriginal rights." Later, Carl noted, "one of the issues that we talked about was LGBTQ issues and [its] history" Carl said that "even just from the Positive Space training binder, there are so many things in there I can use to bring into my classroom." Carl said his experience of including LGBTQ focused curricula was "actually fantastic. I had planned to only spend a period on LGBTQ issues, but my students just got so into it, so we spent two and a half periods on it." Carl was animated when talking about the youth in his classroom. "They just had so many questions, they had so much they wanted to talk about and there was more research they wanted to do. It was awesome. [The students and] I got a lot out of it." This experience enabled Carl to "became more prepared" to do social justice work and infuse LGBTQ curricula in the classroom. Overall Carl reflected on the importance of having social justice pedagogy in faculties of education. He said that "even being a gay man" does not "mean that I have all the tools to support other LGBTQ students. So, I got a lot out of the training." Carl's point is well taken, as everyone's experi-

ences as members of the LGBTQ community is different and approaching these issues in class requires pedagogical knowledge working in relationship with content knowledge.

Another participant, Kathy, gained experience in using texts that queered the educational space of her grade 7 English language arts class. Kathy, who identifies as queer, explained that during her field experience she had been bringing in a variety of voices to her classroom, mostly from different cultures, but when she wanted to bring in LGBTQ specific curricula, her cooperating teacher (CT) became a little nervous. Kathy explained:

> I did poetry and I tried to be as open as I could with my grade sevens. I made sure I had different cultures brought into the classroom... instead of just [examining] dead old white guys who created poetry. I looked into Rita Joe, [for example]...I really wanted to tie in LGBTQ things and when I went to my CT in...[a] very rural, very Catholic [area]..., she had an issue with it. She was worried for the children even though I had talked about all these other types of cultures and minorities...she feared for me...a backlash from the parents? (Kathy, Focus group interview, March 6, 2014)

This dynamic is not only real in Kathy's situation, but this particular concern, fear of parents at the school level, emerged for all our interviewees. Teacher candidates in our program often say that one of the benefits of the Positive Space training is that they learn that provincial curricula do support a number of voices and diversities, as does the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (Government of Canada, 1982). Given Kathy's added experience as a trainer, she was prepared and did not easily back down from her CT's concerns. Kathy inquired further into her CT's concerns and found,

> She [was concerned about]...the idea of sexualizing [the curricula]. I was like "No, no, no, no, I am not doing that. I am talking about androgynous and this type of poetry[3] that is so ambiguous that you don't know who is writing it and who it is written for...the whole purpose of the lesson, [is for the] students to come to their own conclusions." [I wanted to introduce them to] poems that could be related to male-female, female-female, male-male, asexual. I just want to try and get as broad as possible. (Kathy, Focus group interview, March 6, 2014)

Certainly, the Nova Scotia Department of Education and Early Childhood Development's English language arts curriculum for secondary learners encourages educators to expose students to a wide range of literary texts. To Kathy and her CT's credit, they worked through this apprehension, fear, concern, and misunderstanding, and Kathy went forward with her lesson:

> It was nice. There was a boy in the front and he said "well a girl wrote it, so it has to be about a boy." And one of the kids that usually just sits there and doodles shot their hand up and they were like "No, it can be about anyone; it can be about a boy and a boy, a girl and a girl or both or neither, anything you want it to be, it is just two people"...I thought it was so great that a 12-year-old is getting it. (Kathy, Focus group interview, March 6, 2014)

Kathy's poetic queering of the curricula, perhaps, helped a number of students imagine and affirm a non-heterosexual paradigm. Even though this lesson was hard for Kathy and she felt as though her "CT was biting her nails in the back" of the class, it was a learning experience for all. Kathy said in the end, her CT "took my poems and she said she is going to do it the following year, which is a bonus." As for Kathy, she felt affirmed. Although Kathy explained that she "never said that I had a girlfriend. I never said that I was gay or straight" in the classroom; in fact, Kathy explained that she "talked…a lot about [her] cat." Kathy said that she did this consciously, as she "didn't want them to define me as the gay teacher teaching gay stuff. I wanted to be just the teacher teaching diversity in general" (Focus group interview, March 2014).

Identifying as leaders in strategic curriculum spaces for the LGBTQ community

Beth and Anne, two teacher candidates who identify as heterosexual, cis-gender, and allies, illustrated, during a focus group interview, how they acknowledge and choose strategic curriculum spaces outside the classroom to enact their allyship. Beth spoke of how she chose, in her field placement, to become involved in the Gender Sexuality Alliances (GSA) in her school.

> When I went through school, there was no GSA; then, when I went back to my old high school for practicum, they were just looking to start one up. So I think it is really important to continue to work on your professional development…. Times are changing and it is important to keep up. Now I am part of the GSA regional review. (Beth, Focus group interview, February 20, 2014)

Anne spoke of the efforts the GSA was making in her school to create more equity for LGBTQ students: "in the GSA, we are working on gender-neutral bathrooms. We feel maybe — it will be challenging — because we are in very rural communities and Catholic communities, but that would be ideal" (Anne, Focus group interview, February 20, 2014).

Anne further hoped the GSA would grow, as there were only "a handful of students…who are in it…right now." Anne thought "more advertising and announcements and events that the whole school could attend" could help promote the GSA.

Beth demonstrated her agency to make a choice to identify herself as a supportive teacher with the GSA. She credited Positive Space training with giving her the confidence to be able to be a leader in this strategic location of the school landscape: "Positive Space training has given me more knowledge and I feel more comfortable talking to students about terminology and different experiences…it gave me a little extra push. The Positive Space workshops are very efficient" (Beth, Focus group interview, February 20, 2014).

Beth described participating in the school GSA as an important space with different learning opportunities and a chance to connect and deepen relationships with students:

> I find I get to know the students on a totally different level than in the classroom. Some of my students who are in the GSA, they are not my students. They are my teacher's students but they sit in on my class. They are surprised to see me up there. Yeah, it lets them open up in a different way. So, I find that really rewarding. I get to know them much better after school than in the classroom with all the other kids there. It is really rewarding when they feel comfortable enough to share stories in front of you. On a personal level, just knowing, even though I am just one person, I am making a difference. I feel as a straight Christian, that it is a little different than coming from someone from the LBGTQ community. It is not always enough, you [also] need straight allies. (Beth, Focus group interview, February 20, 2014)

The extent to which Beth enacts social justice education in the formal curriculum in her field placement is not clear from this interview, but she reportedly found a space from which she could act as and be an ally. Both she and her students feel valued and empowered in the GSA. It is in the acting that social justice education comes alive. Good intentions alone will not address the homophobia and transphobia that exist in schools; individual and collective actions do (Taylor et al., 2009, 2011).

Witnessing social justice practices enacted in curricular spaces

In our program, we aim to present our teacher candidates with an understanding of power in schools and society, alongside the opportunities they will have within formal and informal curricular spaces to create equity. Issues of power and privilege confront them as they aim to be allies and advocates for LGBTQ students (Kearns et al., 2014a; Mitton-Kükner et al., 2016). They are also immersed in power relations alongside their cooperating teachers who hold significant evaluative power over them. This work is political and tricky. Sometimes teacher candidates aiming to do ally work find themselves limited in how much they can challenge homophobia and transphobia (Kearns et al., 2014a), which emphasizes the importance of working with experienced teachers who can model such kinds of teaching.

During a focus group interview, two teacher candidates described witnessing their CTs taking a leadership role in anti-oppressive education. Gillian, a Year 2 pre-service teacher, struggled with knowing how she might enlarge the curriculum to include LGBTQ families at the elementary level, where opposition to such education is frequently more contested. Witnessing her cooperative teacher's creation of inclusive moments appears to have increased her confidence in this area. Gillian explains,

> My CT, she was in this program a few years ago, she's pretty young, and she had the Positive Space sticker on the door – even though she's a primary teacher...We do the morning message everyday, and we have pictures [to illustrate] the words to help kids learn. We had "Good morning boys and girls," with a boy symbol, girl symbol. So one day my CT just did a dress on both of them [boy and girl symbols] to see what the kids would say. And

> of course, they were like, "Oh, you drew it wrong, boys don't wear dresses." And it was just a whole teachable moment where, you know, "boys do and girls can wear pants and girls can wear short hair, boys can have long hair." It was just teachable moments like that, so it was...not really being an ally for standing up. It was more like being an ally teaching children even at a young age [about gender]. [Also] She had *Tango Makes Three*, [a book about adoptive and same sex parenting]...in the classroom. (Gillian, Focus group interview, January 10, 2014)

In these moments, Gillian saw the curriculum as more malleable than she had imagined. Virginia, another teacher candidate, also spoke of how important it was for her to be nested in a supportive environment as her sense of social justice was developing.

Virginia witnessed her cooperating teacher challenge a student's opinion about gender. Observing this incident empowered Virginia as an emerging advocate for social justice education. Virginia explained,

> We were looking at...different ideals about beauty. And the student was like "How can we even look at beauty anymore when we have men dressing as women, women dressing as men?" My CT was just amazing, she just shut him down right away. She was like "No." Because...usually, she was so supportive of stuff and she would, like, try to change their minds and when he came up with a statement like that, she just shut it down immediately. [She said], "That's...inappropriate and I'm sorry...I can't accept that in my classroom." And he stopped and...after class he came and apologized and stuff. So it was a really good moment...for a potentially explosive situation [laughter]. Yeah. (Virginia, Focus group interview, January 10, 2014).

This example illustrates how heteronormativity operates informally in the classroom, and how educators who are awake to cis-gender and heteronormative privilege have the opportunity to interrupt these discourses. Critical social justice educators need to constantly be reactive and proactive in their teaching. The experiences Gillian and Virginia had alongside seasoned cooperating teachers, who were able to model anti-oppressive teaching, and their ability to reflect upon these moments with their CTs are not common in teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 2004). However, when they do occur, they provide formative and potentially transformative moments for teacher candidates.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Initial analysis of data indicates that teacher candidates who completed the Positive Space training program and who went on to become trainers increased their critical awareness to be not only cognizant of individual acts of oppression, such as slurs, and social exclusion, but also examine how heteronormativity is re-inscribed in multiple, layered, and often nuanced ways in school policy, curriculum, texts, celebrations and events, and decision making. Participants credited their heightened social justice pedagogy and empowerment with hav-

ing a solid knowledge base about LGBTQ issues and an accompanying set of strategies gained through the additional training. McDonald (2005) in her research on the integration of social justice into teacher education programs noted, "teachers' opportunities to learn conceptual tools far outweighed their opportunities to learn practical tools" (p. 427). We feel the combination of theory, practice, application, and reflection that is part of the Positive Space training program helped our teacher candidates. Many perceive themselves as playing a leadership role in their future school settings, such as being a lead in the creation of GSAs or facilitating LGBTQ workshops for their colleagues. It appears that the developmental and applied nature of our program enabled them to blend their concept of being an ally to LGBTQ community members with an action-oriented social justice pedagogy. This is not to say that all of the participants who participated in the training were equally ready or skilled or did not require the support of mentors, but to say that all did find ways to act in classroom spaces.

Several participants described their use of topics, content, and language usage to include LGBTQ identities in the classroom as a choice they had explicitly made. As Cummins (2009) reminds us, "choice is always an option, as well as an ethical responsibility and a pedagogical opportunity. Regardless of institutional constraints, educators have individual and collective choices in how they negotiate identities with students and communities" (p. 262). Cummins describes the agency that individual teachers, even beginning teachers, have within schools and systems as too often appearing to be hierarchical and static in nature. It is this "ethical knowledge" (Kitchen & Bellini, 2012, p. 444) we wish teacher candidates to acquire while at faculties of education so that they are able to understand and have the confidence to open up the curriculum to include LGBTQ experiences and realities.

All of the participants described our program and explicit LGBTQ training as giving them a deeper sense of agency for what they can do in their classrooms and what they can do collaboratively with others in the larger school community. The teacher candidates who volunteered to become trainers themselves and who took on a leadership role may be viewed as "real change agent" teachers who "use their professional agency to learn and influence or change education at school" (van der Heijden, Geldens, Beijaard & Popeijus, 2015, p. 697). Several teacher candidates reportedly felt empowered by the training, which enabled them to move beyond what they had been taught or experienced at schools. Some of the participants described how they creatively used existing curricula to challenge heteronormativity, seeing it as places of critical possibilities (Solomon et al., 2011).

We note with interest the differences between those participants who taught at the secondary and elementary level in terms of their initial ideas about LGBTQ curricula as well as some differences amongst those individuals who

identified as LGBTQ and those who identified as CH. However, given the self-selected group of identified leaders and a high level of empowerment, we hesitate to make any broad generalizations, but see this as an area of interest. We are cautiously optimistic that with support and in some contexts, social justice work can and does take place by a variety of teachers, in different subject areas and in different grade levels, and by both LGBTQ and CH educators.

However, having a professional license does not prevent LGBTQ teachers from experiencing homophobia and transphobia. In 2001, a Nova Scotian teacher, Lindsay Willow, was falsely accused of having a sexual relationship with a student based on her label as a lesbian. Willows took her case to the Nova Scotian Human Rights Board. A ruling by the Human Rights Board five years later exonerated her. The chair of the board, Walter Thompson, stated that an otherwise innocent event of a physical educator putting away gymnasium equipment with a student in a locker room was interpreted through a homophobic lens. "They [the events of the case] were innocent. The construction of them as indicative of a sexual assault demonstrates, in my view, an element of discrimination against Ms. Willow because of her perceived sexual orientation," he said (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation [CBC], 2006). Khayatt (1990) in her study of 19 Ontario lesbian teachers noted that "lesbian teachers have to rely on concealing their sexuality, in part, by becoming more aware of the distinction between the private and the public worlds and by existing in each differently" (p. 186). Taylor et al. (2015), in their study on Canadian educator's experiences and perspectives on LGBTQ education, found that the "likelihood of being comfortable [being engaged in LGBTQ education] was strongly correlated to participant characteristics, with guidance counselors, LGBTQ participants, and First Nation, Métis and Inuit participants and senior-years educators more comfortable than their peers" (p. 20). However "LGBTQ educators were more likely that CH educators to report that discussing LGBTQ issues would jeopardize their jobs" (p. 21). In previous writing (Kearns et al., 2014a; Mitton-Kükner et al., 2016), we noted that power is at play in social justice education. Pre-service teachers are particularly vulnerable within the power structure of schools. It would stand to reason that LGBTQ teacher candidate would experience the power imbalance more acutely. We hope to examine these differences more fully in subsequent research.

Overall, we see hopeful beginnings and want to further plant seeds of transformation and change as we continue with this work by naming and sharing pedagogical practices and strategies that emerge in the teaching practices of these participants. Our research journey with our pre-service teachers is validating their efforts to become social justice educators. Our research conversations help them work through the frustrations, the nuances, and the complications that are part of doing this work. We are able to affirm with them the moments when their agency and advocacy does create change in classrooms and hallways. Likewise, their stories inform our pedagogy as teacher educators and makes us

think hard about how we model anti-oppressive teaching in our faculty. The findings of this research also will continue to shape the evolution of the Positive Space program. We are also reminded of the need to unpack their field experiences for, as Schön (1983) reminds us, it is reflection that gives meaning to experience. There is still much work to do to re-story the curriculum to embed and value LGBTQ identities. Teacher-education has a critical role to play in social justice and equity in schools and society.

CONCLUSION

LGBTQ students and other students who face discrimination and marginalization in schools urgently need teachers to challenge injustice in schools. Our study provides practical examples of how critical curricula and social justice education can be brought together to inform teacher education. By embedding Positive Space training into the formal curriculum of two compulsory foundations courses, we are able to model to teacher candidates how to disrupt, disturb, and de-privilege taken-for-granted notions of curriculum and implement anti-discrimination strategies. Because of the program expectations of our teacher education program, some of our teacher candidates tend to be more action-oriented in their planning and interpretation of curriculum. As the nature of social justice teaching is often nuanced and involves risks for beginning teachers, our participants appreciated the opportunities to critically reflect upon and share their experiences, learning, and possibilities for their future practice.

NOTES

1. We recognize that language and terms of usage are evolving. We acknowledge that the history of some terms, such as queer is complex, and that some abbreviated letters also have multiple meanings. In our context, for example, we talk about the "T" in multiple ways, to signal Transgender and we also recognize the Indigenous tradition of Two-spirited. We also note that with greater awareness and different conversations these terms may also be added to or changed.

2. When first established, the acronym GSA was defined as Gay Straight Alliance and was meant to be a safe and supportive social space for students from the LGBTQ community and allies. More recently, in efforts to be more inclusive of issues of gender identity as well as sexual orientation, in our context, GSA is understood to mean Gender and Sexuality Alliances.

3. The resource Kathy referred to is called *Hir: A poem about transgender youth*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRLSgPQG0c4

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