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## The Power Of Language And Its Integral Role In Lgbtq+ Inclusion In Education

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THE POWER OF LANGUAGE AND ITS INTEGRAL ROLE IN LGBTQ+  
INCLUSION IN EDUCATION

by

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in Teaching.

Hamline University

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Diversity! Inclusion! If you work in education, chances are you have heard these words more than a time or two. But what do they really mean? When you think of people who are already ‘included’ in education and mainstream society, who comes to mind? When you think of people who haven’t been fully embraced by either education or mainstream society, who comes to mind? A couple of years ago, I had the opportunity to attend a professional development focused on trauma and its impacts on students. The facilitator was discussing how different identities can add to experiences of trauma, and he encouraged the room full of white educators to consider the importance of diversity and inclusion when attempting to create safe spaces for students. He then shared a couple of questions that his wife, who is a person of color, asked him as a white man: “Diversity *from what?*”, and “Inclusion *into what?*” (T. Reitzner, personal communication, September, 2019). Those questions have stuck with me, and I find myself returning to them frequently, especially due to the regular occurrence of these buzzwords within the world of education.

I believe the point that was being made is that there is a ‘norm’ that exists, and those deemed as ‘others’ are existing in contrast to it, or in a *diverse* manner from the dominant narrative. This dominant narrative includes features of race, class, gender and sexuality among others, and centers those in our society who have historically and still currently hold privileges within systems of power. When critically examining the basis of what is used in comparisons of diversity, and attempts to include ‘others’, I question

whether we are naming these efforts, and using language in ways that reflect awareness of and sensitivity towards those very people we are trying to include.

As a person who identifies as *queer*, which is an umbrella term encompassing various non-normative identities, I am particularly interested in the seeming disconnect between the intention to create inclusive spaces for *LGBTQ+* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning, + other identities) individuals in education, and the lack of awareness surrounding the culture and language of this community. This noticing combined with personally witnessing harmful language being used by students and staff, sometimes out of ignorance, and sometimes out of malice, has prompted me to focus on the need for increased awareness surrounding the effects of language on *LGBTQ+* communities in education. Throughout this capstone project, I will be attempting to answer the question: *How does understanding language enable educators to move from being allies in intention to allies in action?*

### **The Power of Language**

Language is an essential tool that we use every day to give meaning to the world around us, and to distinguish everyone and everything. It is how we identify ourselves, communicate with others, and name everything in our reality. Language can be specialized and specific depending on the topic, and language can carry connotations, nuance, and myriad other significant meanings. While it can be unique to each individual, there is often collectively agreed upon language that is used by groups of people who share interests or identities.

A few examples of commonly used terms in the *LGBTQ+* community are *cisgender* / *cis* (someone who identifies with the gender assigned at birth), *transgender* /

*trans* (not identifying with the gender assigned at birth). Many non-conforming people find the use of ‘biological’ in reference to sex / gender to be offensive, as their bodies *are* their biology, and therefore, their biology is in alignment with their self-determined gender / identity. *Nonbinary* is an identity that describes a person who does not identify exclusively as male or female (whether cisgender or transgender); nonbinary individuals may feel that their gender falls between the two traditional binary genders, or perhaps encompasses both genders, or neither. People who are nonbinary sometimes use ‘*they* / *them*’ pronouns, or other alternatives to ‘he’ or ‘she’. This sometimes ruffles the feathers of ‘linguistics fanatics’ who insist that using ‘they’ as a singular pronoun is incorrect. However, this practice is not new, and is how we commonly refer to those whose genders are unknown. An example of this could sound like: “Someone left behind their umbrella. I wonder if they will come back to get it?” These examples are provided as a small window into language used in the LGBTQ+ community; understanding how to talk about non-conforming identities, and using affirming language are integral components of LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Language is powerful and personal, and can be uplifting or devastating depending on how it is wielded. The old, familiar proverb *sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me* may be heard shouted on the playground with convincing ferocity, but the reality for most of us is that words can indeed be hurtful. This rendition of the proverb, which is from a fictional character in children’s literature named Ruby Redfort (Child, n.d., as cited in Karst, 2020), speaks to me truthfully about the power words possess:

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can also hurt me.

Stones and sticks break only skin, while words are ghosts that haunt me.

Slant and curved, the word-swords fall, it pierces and sticks inside me.

Bats and bricks may ache through bones, but words can mortify me.

Pain from words has left its scar, on mind and heart that's tender.

Cuts and bruises have not healed, it's words that I remember. (para.1)

If you have ever been bullied, or treated cruelly for some reason, it is likely that these words will resonate with you. This is especially true for 'others', who must navigate a world that does not always embrace diversity, and where inclusion is not always the goal.

### **It's Okay To Say 'Gay'**

That is unless you teach in Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, or Michigan, which are referred to as *No Promo Homo* (no promotion of homosexuality) states due to their anti-LGBTQ+ legislation (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2021). In these states, language surrounding LGBTQ+ topics is either restricted, or banned in schools, and in some cases educators are expected to inform students that these types of 'lifestyles' are not healthy choices, and are in fact, illegal (GLSEN, 2021)! Imagine how damaging this language is for everyone, whether they are part of the LGBTQ+ community or not. The implications of this type of intolerance are far reaching, and potentially severe. Thankfully, I hold a teaching license in Minnesota, which is one of nine states that specifically names LGBTQ+ students in nondiscrimination policies, and offers 'friendly advice' on working with this population of learners (GLSEN, 2021). While this is reassuring, it is clear that there is much more work to be done on local and national scales before students will truly have safe, inclusive learning environments where they can see themselves represented.

The question: *How can understanding language enable educators to move from being allies in intention to allies in action?* is mainly being approached with students in mind, but is applicable to the inclusion of all people, including staff, who identify as LGBTQ+. This chapter will highlight some of my experiences in schools which exposed school staffs' lack of awareness regarding language use, and personal bias against queer and trans identities. I plan to research the impacts of language in regards to these communities of learners, and develop a compendium of information that can be used by educators who are striving towards building safe, inclusive learning environments.

**Please Check One: Male or Female**

We live in a society where heteronormativity and cisgender identity are the 'norm', and gender is assigned to us at birth based on a medical professional's inspection of our genitals. The declaration is that we are either a boy or a girl, and sometimes those declarations are made publicly in a burst of pink or blue glitter before we have been physically born. In our highly gendered world, language often revolves around the gender binary, or the assumption that there are two genders, which are male and female. People that feel passionately about the existence of only two, inflexible genders commonly seem to offer scientific backing to their beliefs by espousing biology as the fundamental, and non-negotiable dictator of a person's sex and gender. However, people who rely on the concept of biology as a means to negate the existence or validity of people who do not conform to the gender binary, or who claim that it is 'unnatural' to be anything other than heterosexual, are either unknowingly or intentionally omitting the extensive scientific evidence that proves otherwise.

One example of omission is the lack of visibility and inclusion of *intersex* identity within mainstream society. InterACT, which is an advocacy organization working to increase intersex awareness, defines the term intersex as a condition in which people are born with variations in sex traits and anatomy related to reproduction (What is Intersex?, n.d.). Individuals who identify as intersex may have differences in chromosomes, internal and external anatomy relating to reproduction, and / or hormones (What is Intersex?, n.d.). Babies and children are often forced, without consent, to undergo surgeries or alterations of their physical bodies in order to conform to what society deems as the ‘normal’ gender binary of male or female (What is Intersex?, n.d.). I am highlighting the existence of intersex individuals and societal erasure to disrupt the notion that bodies always fall into one of two, rigid categories. Considering that the rate of people being born with intersex traits are around the same as people being born with red hair (InterACT, n.d.), there is a good chance that every teacher will teach students who are intersex throughout their career, whether they are aware of this identity or not.

Schools generally operate heavily within the gender binary, and even the most well-meaning allies can be heard giving directives including ‘boys and girls’, or ‘ladies and gentlemen’. Students are sometimes forced to use names and / or pronouns that do not align with their gender or personal identity, and are often subjected to cruel and ignorant comments made from peers and staff alike. LGBTQ+ youth face serious hardships in educational settings due to a prevalence of bias, harassment, bullying, and a lack of awareness and support from staff members. 57.6% of LGBTQ+ students report feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 43.3% because of their gender expression (GLSEN, 2021). These experiences have many negative impacts for

LGBTQ+ students that include but are not limited to skipping school due to fear, dropping out, or even attempting self-harm. LGBTQ+ youth are 120% more likely to become homeless than their heterosexual, cisgender peers (Human Rights Campaign [HRC], 2020), and are five times as likely to attempt suicide (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 2016) than youth who do not identify as LGBTQ+.

These are only a few examples of the increased risk factors that face LGBTQ+ youth, but I believe that this is more than enough compelling evidence to show the need for educators to have sensitivity and awareness surrounding queer and trans identities, and a commitment to creating safe learning environments for all students. It is imperative that educators understand how language plays a central role in efforts to be inclusive of these populations, and also of the damage that occurs when language is used in harmful ways towards these students. Disrespectful language needs to be interrupted every time without fail, but in order to identify harmful language, teachers must first be familiar with the language used by these communities, and have an awareness of what is generally acceptable or preferable. Though there will always be personal nuance to how individuals relate to, utilize, and respond to language, there is also a wealth of information available about language that is generally deemed acceptable within these communities.

### **What Did You Say?**

Wanting to be an ally to the LGBTQ+ population is not the same as actually *being* an ally. Not hating gay people does not make someone an ally; being an ally in action means, in part, that language is understood in its nuances and used appropriately and respectfully. I have had personal experiences in school settings where I have been told I

can't use the word 'queer' in a self-identifying context because it is an inappropriate term. This came from a well-meaning 'ally' to the LGBTQ+ community, and while it's true that the term has had negative connotations in the past, it is also well-established as a reclaimed word that has been in common use in the LGBTQ+ community for quite some time. Although this teacher is young, has gay best friends, and is considered to be an amazing ally to LGBTQ+ students, it is not enough to *actually* be an effective ally. Exposure is key to understanding the culture and current trends of this community, and requires intentional, ongoing education surrounding the ever-evolving nature of language as it relates to LGBTQ+ identity.

When thinking about potential stories which offer a window into my experiences as a queer person working in education, it feels a bit daunting to choose the 'right' ones that will elicit compassion in others and hopefully lead to a desire for increased awareness and sensitivity towards LGBTQ+ individuals in both schools and society at large. Though, there is one experience that frequently comes to mind when I reflect on inappropriate and harmful language being used in school settings.

I was unfortunately privy to the personal beliefs and insensitive 'jokes' that one teacher felt called to share with colleagues, including myself, who was openly queer and a known advocate for LGBTQ+ students in this school. The teacher was informed that one of his students who is transgender was going to be out for a surgery the following day, and upon receiving this news, he made a loud exclamation of "I thought I had heard it all! My student is having surgery on *his* ovaries!" while shaking his head in a disapproving fashion and rolling his eyes. Other faculty that were present chuckled, while I was momentarily incapacitated by an internal cacophony of what sounded like tires

screeching, breaking glass, and the deep, lamenting wail of my gay heart. It felt simultaneously soul crushing and infuriating. This was happening in a school that has inclusive policies in place for LGBTQ+ students, and provides professional developments relating to supporting this population of learners. The fraction of a second that I had to decide how to respond came and went, and the teacher turned to walk out of the building, but seemed to notice what I am sure was a look of horror on my face, and then concluded his display of transphobia by claiming in a righteous tone “*I believe in biology!*” before jauntily stepping out of the door.

### **Summary**

The stories could go on and on, and because of the nature of this topic, often venture into domains of religious and personal beliefs. However, the purpose of this Capstone Project is not to debate the validity or correctness of queer and trans identities. I am approaching this topic with the generous assumption that educators want what is best for *all* students, and are committed to doing everything they can to provide a safe, inclusive learning environment for the LGBTQ+ population. As we have seen through the examples highlighted in this chapter, there is a genuine need for teachers to increase their knowledge of, effectiveness of, and perhaps willingness to support these students. This chapter has been an effort to show how intention is not the same as impact, and to illustrate the importance of reevaluating what it means to be inclusive. It is not just a buzzword. It is real life, and it can save lives.

This project seeks to investigate the question: *How does understanding language enable educators to move from being allies in intention to allies in action?* through conducting a literature review in Chapter Two. I will be researching approaches to

utilizing language that affirms the identities of these students, and seeking to understand the effects of harmful language. I will also be attempting to unpack dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality, and seeking insight on how to navigate hostility towards inclusion.

In Chapter Three, I will describe my project vision, which is to create a website for the purpose of increasing awareness surrounding LGBTQ+ language and its impacts on inclusion. The hope is that this resource will be useful for educators to strengthen their understanding of what types of language are appropriate and affirming, and what types of language may be harmful. It will include suggestions for assessing personal use of language as it relates to gender, and recommendations that can support gender-neutral language development. I will also strive to provide additional insight and tools that can be useful in ensuring that all students have access to safe, inclusive learning environments that reflect the diversity found in humanity.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

Despite living in a heteronormative society, under the prevailing belief that being heterosexual is the ‘normal’ way of being, and the assumption that sex / gender exist in a rigid, binary system - *queers* - used here to encompass all identities under the LGBTQ+ umbrella - have existed throughout history, and continue to exist. Despite living in a world where being visibly queer can result in rejection by family and friends, harassment and assault, lack of equal rights, denial of dignity and respect, and even death - queers remain. While everyone’s story is different, there are common threads that run through the experiences of being queer in a hostile world where non-conformity can have severe consequences.

The following literature review will attempt to highlight important aspects of LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning, + other identities) history that would be beneficial understanding for anyone involved in efforts towards LGBTQ+ inclusion in education. In order for efforts to be successful, educators need to have awareness of how this identity impacts students, and how language is linked to both positive and negative experiences of school climate. It is also important for educators to recognize the correlation between power and language and how these combine to form systems of social order and control. This chapter will look at themes related to gender norms, heteronormativity, Eugenics’ role in oppression, the diversity found in nature, inclusion, and resistance to inclusion. Discourse as a tool of control *and* resistance, GLSEN’s National Climate Surveys, and critical frameworks that can be useful in

disrupting heteronormativity will also be explored. These themes were chosen in an attempt to answer the question: *How does understanding language enable educators to move from being allies in intention to allies in action?*

### **Boys in Dresses! Girls in Pants! Normal or Not?**

There appears to be an obsession with gender in American (Colonial) society that begins before birth. Pink and blue are colors commonly associated with being a girl or boy respectively, and certain styles of clothing are deemed appropriate for one or the other. Not many people would consider dressing a little boy in a pink gown to be ‘normal’; at least not these days (Baumgarten, 2012; Callahan & Paoletti, 1999; Vincent, 2003, 2009). However, from at least the 1500s until the early 1900s, young children in Western society were dressed in what was considered ‘gender neutral’ clothing that consisted of long gowns which were often adorned with flowers and frilly laces (Baumgarten, 2012; Callahan & Paoletti, 1999; Vincent, 2003, 2009). A quick Google search will result in many historical photographs of prominent men who were reared in flowing dresses, mary-jane style shoes, and sporting long locks of hair. In Figure 1, a photograph of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1885 provides a glimpse into the social norms of older times (Roosevelt Library, 1885).

**Figure 1**

*Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1885*



*Note.* Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library archives.

In her article “History of Children’s Clothing” (n.d.), Colleen Callahan points out that the color of children’s clothing did not take on gendered associations until the early 1900s, at which time pink and blue began to be associated with qualities of being masculine or feminine. This quote which was originally published in the 1916 issue of “Infants’ and Children’s Wear Review” states: “*The generally accepted rule is pink for the boy and blue for the girl*” (Callahan, para. 17). Pink was seen as a fiery color due to its relation to the color red, and blue was seen as being dainty and serene, and therefore deemed appropriate for girls (Callahan, n.d.; DeVito, 2018; Paoletti, 2012). It wasn’t until after World War Two that the color association was reversed into the trend that still operates today (Callahan & Paoletti, 1999; DeVito, 2018). This trend has become so embedded into our societal framework of gender norms that babies’ genders can be ‘perceived’ from the colors alone.

It was not until a boy reached a stage in childhood where he began exhibiting *male* characteristics, generally sometime between the ages of five and seven, that he would transition from being seen as a genderless child wearing gender neutral clothing to wearing pants in a coming of age ceremony called *breeching* (Baumgarten, 2012; Callahan & Paoletti, 1999; Vincent 2003, 2009). Because pants were the signal that the child had now transitioned into a boy, a gendered being, pants came to be seen as a symbol of masculinity, and therefore power, and as such were deemed inappropriate as female clothing (Baumgarten, 2012; Callahan & Paoletti, 1999; Vincent 2003, 2009). While we have come a long way since it was illegal for women to wear pants, and the consequences for doing so were public ridicule, severe harassment, and criminalization

(Vincent, 2009), we are still contending with a heteronormative societal structure which positions certain identities as natural and normal, and others as deviant (Butler, 1990).

The purpose of pointing out these antiquated nuances of color and clothing styles is to draw attention to the fact that societal norms are not static, nor are they based on immutable truths (Paoletti, 2012; Vincent, 2009). Take a moment to consider some of the ways that gender norms have changed over the past few generations. How have these norms, and the ways they are talked about shifted over time? Because language is so heavily intertwined with social norms and practices, it is also intertwined with systems of power and social control (Butler, 1990; Fairclough, 1989; Foucault, 1970; Harcourt, 2007). In order to make sense of how we arrived at our current dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality, a look into the history of Eugenics may provide some insight.

### **Eugenics: The ‘Science’ and Discourse of Oppression**

*Compulsory Heterosexuality* is a term coined by Adrienne Rich (1980) which describes the assumption that everyone is, by default, heterosexual. No one has to *come out* as *straight* because it is what is expected and deemed ‘natural’ in American (Colonial) society. This belief is rooted in Eurocentric, Christian views of gender and sexuality, and is not a view shared universally by all cultures (Gevisser, 2016; Gilley, 2011). As Mark Gevisser shares in the BBC article “Do We Need More Than Two Genders?” (2016), many cultures recognize three or more genders and gender-fluid identities. Before colonization, Indigenous communities did not follow heteronormative social structures (Gilley, 2011; Indian Health Service [IHS], n.d.). Though each Indigenous culture has its own language and customs surrounding gender and sexuality,

the phrase *two-spirit* is sometimes used as an umbrella term to describe Native Americans with gender-expansive identities (Gilley, 2011; IHS, n.d.). Although it is evident that not everyone fits into, nor believes in heteronormative narratives, dominant social discourse maintains that this is the correct and natural way of being (Butler, 1990).

Heteronormativity relies on a binary sex / gender system in which one sex / gender is sexually attracted to the opposite sex / gender (Butler, 1990). These beliefs surrounding the gender binary and heterosexuality are rooted in *biological essentialism*, which positions biology as the immutable determiner of one's sex / gender, and uses concepts such as chromosomes to define categories of male and female (Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2020; Richardson, 2015 ). Although some may prefer to think of the X and Y chromosomal determinants of sex / gender as ancient truths, they were not theorized and subsequently categorized as such until the 1960s when traditional gender roles were being increasingly challenged (Richardson, 2015). The movement to align chromosomes with binary sex / gender was met with criticism at the time among scientists who feared that assigning sex based on biological features could be used to claim genetic superiority, or maintain societal oppression of non-conforming individuals (Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2020; Richardson, 2015).

This was not an unfounded fear considering the history of *Eugenics*, which is a term coined by Francis Galton in 1883. Eugenics refers to the study of genetic characteristics that were deemed *desirable* or *undesirable* in the quest for human perfection; Eugenicists promoted selective breeding in order to preserve a social order of male dominance and white supremacy (Levine, 2017; Ordovery, 2003; Stern, 2015). The *science* of Eugenics was used as a tool of oppression, and had far reaching, devastating

implications for anyone who was ‘othered’ by race, class, ability, sexuality, gender identity or expression, or anyone who was a target of hatred and bigotry (Levine, 2017; Ordovery, 2003; Stern, 2015). Biological essentialism was used to justify nationalist, sexist, ablist, homophobic, transphobic, and racist beliefs which led towards efforts at eradicating anyone who was seen as exhibiting *uncivilized*, and *inferior* characteristics - essentially anyone who did not hold power or exist in ‘socially acceptable’ ways was in jeopardy of being targeted; this is painfully evident by Eugenics’ role in the Holocaust (Levine, 2017). In 1945, when the U.S. liberated those being held in concentration camps, they freed everyone except the ‘homosexuals’; they sent the homosexuals to German prisons (Caruchet, 2019, para. 3). Homosexuality was *illegal* in Germany until 1994; In 1952, most victims of the Holocaust were offered reparations from the German government, however, homosexuals who had been held, and suffered an even longer reign of terror were not offered reparations until 2017 (Caruchet, 2019, para. 4).

In America, Eugenicists used *scientific* reasoning to justify sordid medical procedures, including forcibly sterilizing thousands of people - predominantly People of Color, people with disabilities, and people deemed LGBTQ+ (Levine, 2017). Attempts at erasing these *undesirable* populations were carried out with astonishing tenacity in order to prevent their genetics from ‘tainting’ or challenging the ideal of a white, heteronormative society (Cogdell, 2010; Ordovery, 2003; Stern, 2015). Sexual and gender non-conforming individuals were criminalized, and the consequences for being visibly queer were severe as Caruchet explains in his 2019 article “When the U.S. Used Lobotomies to Create Gay Auschwitz”. A mere fifty years ago, the consequences for being caught being gay, or being caught ‘crossdressing’ - which often happened through

police raids on queer social spots - were to be targeted for violence and blackmail, to be publicly outed in the newspaper, and to be incarcerated for six months following the first arrest (Caruchet, 2019, para.6-7). If a homosexual *man* (perceived) was arrested a second time, he was sent to prison and given a choice of treatment for homosexuality - either castration, or a lobotomy (Caruchet, 2019, para.6-7). This practice continued until 1977 when federal protections from medical research / non-consensual procedures were put in place; however, by this time there were many tens of thousands of queer and / or trans people who had been operated upon and had to live with the debilitating affects - if they lived at all (Caruchet, 2019).

Eugenics has a history of being used to support racist, and xenophobic beliefs, but as discourse surrounding race began to shift over time, societal changes led to the unpopularity of using Eugenics to support racism (Ordovery, 2003; Stern, 2015). Eugenicians then shifted their focus to identifying a biological basis for male superiority, heterosexuality, and gender norms (Ordovery, 2003; Stern, 2015). Eugenicians made *scientific claims* such as women being genetically suited for domestic roles - primarily child birth, and that women who received higher education experienced a decline in reproductive capabilities (Fausto-Sterling, 2020). There was scientific *proof* that supported women being inferior to men, and women who aspired to be equal with men were considered mentally unstable (Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2020). People who did not conform to the binary view of sex / gender were considered unnatural, and were often labeled mentally ill as well as predatory (Eskridge, 2000; Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2020). Babies that were born with intersex characteristics were also seen as unnatural and in need of *fixing* in order to align with the gender binary; this led to the practice of

non-consensual surgical procedures that are still being carried out today (InterACT, n.d.) despite extensive scientific evidence that nature resists rigid, predetermined categories (Boeckman, 2006; Roughgarden, 2013).

### **Nature is Queer**

There is a wealth of scientific evidence that points to the non-conformity of nature in matters of sexuality, hormones, chromosomes, reproduction capabilities, genetic variations, physical configurations, and gender expression (Boeckman, 2006; Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2020; Roughgarden, 2013). Human bodies are incredibly unique - each person's biology is as individual as a snowflake or fingerprint (Fausto-Sterling, 1992, 2020). Complexities in biology are also evident across plant and animal species - many of which are intersex - and show incredible fluidity of gender expression, sexuality, and reproductive tendencies (Mascarelli, 2015; Roughgarden, 2013). In Petter Boeckman's article "1,500 Animal Species Practice Homosexuality" (2006), lions, chimpanzees, dolphins, and various birds are named as some of the species known to have regular, long-lasting homosexual partnerships or sexual interactions. In reference to homosexuality among animal species, Boeckman states:

The theme has long been taboo. The problem is that researchers have not seen for themselves that the phenomenon exists or they have been confused when observing homosexual behaviour or that they are fearful of being ridiculed by their colleagues. Many therefore overlook the abundance of material that is found. Many researchers have described homosexuality as something altogether different from sex. They must realise that animals can have sex with who they will, when

they will and without consideration to a researcher's ethical principles. (2006, para. 17)

Despite there being myriad examples of non-conforming gender and sexuality spanning across all biological *kingdoms*, science and an adherence to biological essentialism are still being used as tools of oppression towards people who do not conform to societal norms of sexuality, gender identity, and / or gender expression (Ginicola, Smith & Rhoades, 2016). These beliefs underlie oppressive legislature which aims to limit or deny LGBTQ+ civil rights and prevent inclusion in our public schools (Barrett & Bound, 2015; Eskridge, 2000; Ginicola, Smith & Rhoades, 2016). In 2021, there are still states referred to as *No Promo Homo* (no promotion of homosexuality) where it is illegal to engage in non-heterosexual activity between consenting adults, and students are still being told that homosexuality is a criminal act related to sexual disease and immorality (Barrett & Bound, 2015; Eskridge, 2000; Ginicola, Smith & Rhoades, 2016).

### **No Promo Homo: Pushback to LGBTQ+ Inclusion**

People who oppose LGBTQ+ inclusion in education often “view sexual orientation antidiscrimination laws as infringing on their family values and their rights... not to associate with lesbians, bisexuals, or gay men” (Eskridge, 2000, p.1337). Policies meant to protect people who have been relentlessly oppressed are being interpreted as religious discrimination towards those who are being limited in their homophobic hate speech (Ginicola, Smith & Rhoades, 2016). These sentiments have contributed to national Anti-LGBTQ+ movements, and discriminatory legislation in No Promo Homo states which ban LGBTQ+ topics from being discussed in school settings, unless of a negative nature, and allow school districts to fire staff members who are perceived as

‘promoting’ LGBTQ+ identities as a viable lifestyle (Barrett & Bound, 2015; Eskridge, 2000). Being accepting and inclusive of LGBTQ+ individuals and family structures, and allowing these identities to be visible, affirmed, or even discussed in school settings is being named as an *agenda* being used as a *recruitment tool* to lure students into self-identifying as LGBTQ+ (Eskridge, 2000). This rhetoric positions selective science with roots in Eugenics and religious bigotry over self-sovereignty and equal rights. It is leveraging political power to limit the civil rights of non-conforming individuals to exist as they are - naturally - and to feel respected and affirmed as part of a diverse population of humans (Karkazis & Jordan-Young, 2019).

No Promo Homo policies were originally centered around the rhetoric that gays are gross, homosexuals are psychopathic predators, and homosexuality leads to disease (Eskridge, 2000, p.1329). As discourse surrounding homosexuality and LGBTQ+ inclusion began to shift over time, advocates of No Promo Homo policies started claiming a stance of neutrality towards homosexuality in general, yet maintaining that the topic should be barred in education (Barrett & Bound, 2015). This claim was critically examined by Barrett and Bound, and they indicated in “A Critical Discourse Analysis of No Promo Homo Policies in U.S. Schools” (2015) that the language used to write the policies is far from neutral. The policies are written in a way that positions homosexuality as negative, harmful, and in some states, criminal (Barrett & Bound, 2015). These policies have significantly contributed to the toxic climates of U.S. schools; they impact educators willingness to step in and voice support for LGBTQ+ students, which in turn contributes to the ongoing abuse that queer and trans students face in educational settings (Barrett & Bound, 2015; Eskridge, 2000; Kosciw et al., 2018).

Although pushback to LGBTQ+ inclusion is commonplace, there has been consistent social movement over time towards accepting queer and trans identities (Sadowski, 2016). This change in attitude can be seen in Gallup's annual public opinion polls which asked respondents to indicate whether they supported the idea of consenting adults having legal, 'homosexual' relationships; in the late 1980s, one third of adults surveyed were supportive of the idea versus two thirds in 2014 (as cited in Sadowski, 2016). While this increase in individual support has made positive impacts on LGBTQ+ acceptance in a broader sense, the progress of inclusion in the classroom hasn't kept pace with the larger society (Sadowski, 2016). In 1990, recognizing the plight of LGBTQ+ students, concerned educators formed the advocacy organization GLSEN, which stands for Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2021). In 1999, GLSEN began conducting periodic national surveys of school climates from the perspectives of queer and trans youth; the data collected is used to make suggestions for creating safer, more affirming spaces (GLSEN, 2021). The next section will take a closer look into the experiences of sexual and gender minority youth in school settings.

### **LGBTQ+ Students Speak: GLSEN's National Climate Survey**

LGBTQ+ students have long been suffering in our schools, and according to GLSEN's national surveys, not much has improved (Kosciw et al., 2018). The 2017 survey was conducted online as a series of questions regarding school climate; there were 23,001 participants aged 13-21 who identify as LGBTQ+, and all 50 states were represented (Kosciw et al., 2018). The following statistics were obtained from this survey, and were chosen to highlight some of the struggles that LGBTQ+ students face

on a daily basis in schools across the country, and to draw attention to the lack of support that was reported regarding school staff (Kosciw et al., 2018):

- Almost 8 in 10 LGBTQ students reported feeling unsafe at school (p. 14)
- More than 8 in 10 LGBTQ students experienced harassment or assault at school (p.23)
- Nearly half of the students reported being harassed online in incidents of cyberbullying (p.23)
- Over half of the students reported being sexually harassed at school in the past year (p. 23)
- 47.2% of the time, there was no staff intervention of hateful language (p.19)
- 56.6% of students had heard staff make homophobic remarks (p.18)
- 71% of students had heard staff make transphobic remarks (p.20)

These are only a handful of the statistics that paint a dismal picture of school climate for our nation's LGBTQ+ youth; the challenges queer youth face in educational settings lead to high rates of missing school due to fears for safety, dropping out, and mental health concerns (Kosciw et al., 2018). The toxicity of our nation's schools contributes to the tragic statistic that one in four LGBTQ+ youth has attempted suicide (Kosciw et al., 2018). The full report can be found at [glsen.org](http://glsen.org) (GLSEN, 2021).

The National Climate Surveys open a window into the hostility in our school systems, and tell a story of our failure to protect LGBTQ+ youth (Kosciw et al., 2018). Past efforts towards inclusion were primarily centered around the language of *safe spaces*, but it is clear that this was not sufficient in creating actual safe spaces for queer

and trans students (Sadowski, 2016). One issue that has been identified is the lack of *enumeration* - or the specific naming of - LGBTQ+ individuals as a protected group in antidiscrimination policies (Kosciw et al., 2018; Sadowski, 2016). GLSEN research shows that when ‘at risk’ groups are specifically enumerated in district policies, educators are more confident and willing to enforce them (Kosciw et al., 2018; Sadowski, 2016). Other suggestions for strengthening inclusion based on GLSEN climate survey research include:

- increasing inclusive-curriculum
- increasing access to LGBTQ+ information and texts
- supporting the formation of GSAs (Gender and Sexuality Alliances - formerly known as Gay Straight Alliances)
- providing professional development for staff to improve interventions and provide support
- assessing school policies such as dress codes for potential discrimination based on gender expression or identity
- implementing affirming policies
- developing systems for reporting and handling incidents (Kosciw et al., 2018, p. 134)

These suggestions, if followed, would likely drastically improve school climates for LGBTQ+ students, so why are we still failing, and what tools can educators use to move from being allies in intention to allies in action? The next section will explore the impacts of language on LGBTQ+ inclusion, and how using critical theories when assessing language use can aid in disrupting heteronormativity in the classroom (Blaise, 2005).

### **Language: It Sends a Message**

Despite general progress towards LGBTQ+ acceptance in society, 2020 saw a significant increase in Anti-LGBTQ+ legislation on a national scale (HRC, 2020). This trend is helping to perpetuate the long standing challenges and fears that educators face when advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusion (Clark, 2010; Robinson, 2005; Sadowski, 2016). These and other obstacles, such as lack of preparation in teacher training programs and unfamiliarity with the nuances of queer culture and language, may lead educators who are allies in intention to choose silence when faced with reality (Clark, 2010). It is crucial that educators are willing to step out of their comfort zone, and engage in dialogue around these topics; not doing so puts some of the most vulnerable students at increased risk which can have life-altering or even life-ending consequences (Kosciw et al, 2018; Sadowski, 2016).

Bullying and harassment are overwhelmingly common experiences reported by LGBTQ+ youth; however, homophobic language is frequently used in instances of bullying regardless of whether the person being bullied identifies as queer (Kosciw et al., 2018). Problematic language and behavior must be interrupted every time without fail, and not simply halted, but also challenged, in order to send a clear message that LGBTQ+ identities are valid and valued in the school community (Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020; Sadowski, 2016). Ensuring that schools take strong approaches to anti-bullying, and have clear policies enumerating LGBTQ+ inclusion and antidiscrimination will help *all students* feel safer at school (Kosciw et al., 2018).

Working to eliminate harmful language contributes to a safer school environment (Kosciw et al., 2018), but inclusion goes beyond the absence of hate speech (Robinson,

2005; Sadowski, 2016). In order to include LGBTQ+ people into systems that have historically oppressed them, it is important to understand that major shifts in language will have to take place across the board - not only by eradicating harmful language or including LGBTQ+ specific language into classrooms - but by turning a critical lens onto *all language* and how language functions to uphold systems of power (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1970; Robinson, 2005; Sadowski, 2016).

### **Critical Theories: A Sampling of Perspectives**

As previous sections have explored, we live in a heteronormative society that prescribes and proscribes certain ways of being. Heteronormative discourse presents a world where everyone is naturally male or female, and everyone desires those of the opposite sex. Those who hold power in society are responsible for shaping the social norms that everyone else is subjected to; even those who identify as cisgender and heterosexual must still contend with normative gender roles and stereotypes (Butler, 1990). To exist outside of these confines is to challenge the ‘natural order’ of society, and those in power (Butler, 1990). In order to change the rigid systems and make (safe) space for ‘others’, dominant narratives must be critically examined and opposed when found to be unjust (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1970; Freire, 1972). The following subsections will offer a brief overview of frameworks that could prove useful for educators who wish to challenge heteronormativity in their classrooms.

#### ***Poststructuralism***

In his book *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault takes a poststructuralist approach to analyzing language and the role it plays in establishing meaning and social order. Foucault shared these thoughts regarding scientific discourse:

I should like to know whether the subjects responsible for scientific discourse are not determined in their situation, their function, their perceptive capacity, and their practical possibilities by conditions that dominate and even overwhelm them. In short, I tried to explore scientific discourse not from the point of view of the individuals who are speaking, nor from the point of view of the formal structures of what they are saying, but from the point of view of the rules that come into play in the very existence of such discourse. (1970: xiv)

This interrelationship between language, power, and social norms is also described by Mindy Blaise in her article “Playing it Straight: Uncovering Gender Discourses in the Early Childhood Classroom” (2005). Blaise points out that because language is socially constructed and is not fixed, neither are the social norms that result from it; language can be reassessed and reformed, as well as social practices (2005).

**Feminist Poststructuralism.** This framework builds upon the tenets of poststructuralism, but pays special attention to the ways gender is constructed through social discourse and the ways discourse perpetuates gender inequities (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990). Judith Butler theorized that because gender is socially constructed through language, it is not a biological truth that exists outside of discourse; she used the term *gender performativity* to describe socially dictated gender norms / roles (1990).

**Queer Theory.** The principles of *queer theory*, a term first used in 1990 by Teresa de Lauretis, are in alignment with feminist poststructuralist approaches in the belief that language creates and defines gender and sexuality, and thus gender and sexuality related inequities (Blaise, 2005; Butler, 1990; de Lauretis, 1990). Queer theorists challenge heteronormative assumptions and disrupt heteronormative discourse (Blaise, 2005;

Butler, 1990). One approach to utilizing queer theory in the classroom is by analyzing texts with students; encouraging critical thinking and discussions surrounding gender norms is a powerful way to uncover heteronormative stereotypes, and offers opportunities for students to engage with different perspectives (Blaise, 2005; Hartman, 2018).

### ***Critical Pedagogy***

Paulo Freire coined the term *critical pedagogy* in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). Similarly to the previous theories, this educational framework encourages students to critically examine systems of power and challenge dominant narratives. In her article “LGBTQ Inclusion as an Outcome of Critical Pedagogy” (2016), Michelle Lynn Page describes a teacher who successfully incorporates LGBTQ+ topics into her language arts curriculum through the lens of critical pedagogy. This teacher’s focus is on equity, power imbalances, and the disenfranchisement of marginalized people (Page, 2016). She regularly utilizes texts featuring sexual and gender non-conforming characters and LGBTQ+ issues because she knows that these identities are not often centered in school settings, or larger society (Page, 2016). Her efforts at inclusion are tied to her understanding of how those in power control curriculum choices, and decide whose stories get to be told (Page, 2016). This prompted her to get involved with her school district’s curriculum approval team, and act as an advocate for LGBTQ+ inclusive texts. Although she experienced pushback from colleagues and described disproportionately emotional reactions to her suggestions when compared with other subjects, her presence and commitment to practice inclusion made a significant difference for the students in that district (Page, 2016). This is an example of critical pedagogy in action.

### ***Critical Inclusion***

In 2020, Kokozos and Gonzalez published an article called “Critical Inclusion: Disrupting LGBTQ Normative Frameworks in School Contexts”. Their analysis of inclusion is that it is often the most dominant identities that are chosen to be represented: white, middle-class, and able-bodied. It is important to highlight the *diversity* of identities within the LGBTQ+ community and pay special attention to the intersectionality of marginalized identities (Crenshaw, 1989; Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020). Turning a critical lens on inclusion itself will help educators assess whether their efforts to represent LGBTQ+ identities and topics in the classroom are truly reflective of the diversity found within this population, or whether they are unintentionally centering the most dominant narratives within queer culture (Kokozos & Gonzalez, 2020).

### **Summary**

The literature reviewed in this chapter was chosen in an effort to answer the question: *How does understanding language enable educators to move from being allies in intention to allies in action?* Originally, my intention was to focus on the need for increasing awareness surrounding affirming language, and to draw attention to the harm that language can cause when not used respectfully. Ironically, I was approaching the topic of language from a binary perspective of good / bad, or affirming / harmful. I was trying to isolate *types* of language and their effects rather than turning a critical lens onto *all language* and the ways it functions as a tool in maintaining a heteronormative social order (Butler, 1990; Foucault, 1970; Freire, 1972). By journeying into the critical perspectives of Paulo Friere, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, just to name a few, I

came to realize that inclusion will never truly be successful if it rests without resistance on a foundation of heteronormativity.

Using critical theories to assess the world around us can help uncover the ways that biased beliefs have driven the establishment of a heteronormative society. Critically examining the histories and narratives that have led us here will help expose imbalances and misuses of power. People with power have pushed dominant narratives, and punished nonconformists so forcefully for so long that many people believe these narratives to be fundamental truths. Pushback to LGBTQ+ inclusion often centers religious beliefs and biological determinism as the justifiers for bigotry and oppression. While there is ample scientific evidence that illustrates the diverse nature of our existence, and it has been well established that personal religious bias has no place in our educational system, the reality is that these beliefs remain a constant threat to LGBTQ+ individuals and allies. Critically examining the ways social norms and language shift over time, and exposing the corrupted 'science' of Eugenics has been an attempt to disrupt dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality and offer less rigid interpretations of what it means to be a normal and natural human being.

We have a long way to go before LGBTQ+ inclusion will be considered the 'norm', and it seems evident that educators could use additional support on this journey. In response to this recognition, I plan to create a website which can function as a compendium of information relating to inclusion. The website will provide an overview of the topics covered in the previous literature review, and will link to additional resources. It will also offer suggestions and tools that educators may find helpful when working to create equitable, inclusive learning environments. In my experience,

professional development trainings surrounding LGBTQ+ topics tend to center around *thinking*, and are often presented by people who do not identify as queer to people who do not identify as queer. I believe that intentionally centering the stories of queer people within the dialogue of inclusion can create opportunities for connecting and *feeling* on a human level. A website has the potential to meet all of these needs; it can house a vast amount of information which can be updated as norms and discourses shift over time, it can act as a platform for queer visibility, and it allows a wide audience to access the content. The following chapter will outline some of the major considerations and processes involved with designing and implementing this project.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Project Description

#### Introduction

The previous chapters have explored topics related to LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning, + other identities) history, identity, and inclusion in education. The ‘science’ of Eugenics was analyzed in order to unpack common narratives claiming biological determinism as a fundamental truth, and critical theories were assessed for their usefulness in disrupting heteronormative discourses and exposing gender and sexuality inequities. This exploration was an attempt to answer the question: *How does understanding language enable educators to move from being allies in intention to allies in action?* The inspiration for this inquiry stemmed from the disconnect between the push for diversity and inclusion in schools, and the lack of successful implementation. It is clear that educators need support in taking on this challenge; this recognition prompted me to envision creating a resource that can help raise awareness and offer tools for educators as they navigate the work of inclusion. Based on several considerations, I determined that a website has the potential for meeting this need. Chapter Three will present the rationale involved in making this decision, and will outline the planning process for building an accessible website using a Content Management System (CMS).

#### Rationale

As highlighted in Chapter Two, the existence of *No Promo Homo* (no promotion of homosexuality) policies are still acting as barriers to inclusion in certain states, and are contributing to ongoing fears of pushback that educators face when vocalizing support for

this population (Eskridge, 2000). School districts with these policies in place prohibit positive representations of LGBTQ+ identities, and ban teachers from engaging in dialogue around related topics - even when intervening in instances of bullying or harassment (Eskridge, 2000). It is then reasonable to assume that districts operating under No Promo Homo policies are not providing professional development opportunities aimed at LGBTQ+ inclusion, and resources such as staff trainings and inclusive curriculum would not be utilized in those districts. This was a major consideration that led me to believe that creating a website would have the potential to reach the widest audience. A website is accessible for educators in any state no matter what policies are in place, and unlike specific materials that require distribution, websites can be found through a basic internet search. The next section will elaborate on the website content, and the knowledge that will be needed for successful implementation.

### **Website Description**

The website created for this project will act as a host for information relating to LGBTQ+ inclusion in education. The intention is that it will be an accessible resource for anyone who is seeking an understanding of queer culture, history, language, and the experiences of queer youth as they navigate school systems. Many of the sources referenced in this paper will be included, and additional topics will be added over time. My goals with creating a website are to open a window into the LGBTQ+ community, to offer perspectives that will allow educators to connect on a heart-level and deepen their compassion for the struggles of being queer in a heteronormative educational system, and suggest tips for strengthening inclusion efforts.

Because I have never created a website, and do not have the skills to write my own code, I plan to use a Content Management System (CMS) to act as a host. There are many to choose from, and each CMS has its own repertoire of design templates. One of my primary concerns relating to website design is to ensure that the CMS I choose uses Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) when writing their code. Following WCAG guidelines allows people with disabilities an equitable user experience on the internet (Macfound.org, n.d.). The article “Inclusive Design: Bring Web Accessibility to Your Nonprofit” published by The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (n.d.) offers suggestions for CMSs that prioritize accessibility. This has been helpful in choosing a host for my site, and knowing how to search for specific features on templates. Based on this information, I plan to use the CMS WordPress, which has one of the highest accessibility ratings that I have found thus far (Macfound.org, n.d.). People who rely on assistive technology will only be able to access digital content if it is designed to be compatible with their devices. An example of this would be someone who uses a screen reader; if the content is not coded in a way that the screen reader can navigate and read, then that person is being denied access to that information.

Digital accessibility is not the only concern when it comes to creating a website. There are many regulations to be aware of, such as copyright laws, which must be adhered to. Many of the LGBTQ+ inclusion related resources currently available are copyrighted by the organizations that created them, and as such cannot be altered or shared without permission (Prescott, 2019). This creates further obstacles for educators seeking usable resources for the classroom. As Sabia Prescott explains in the article “Supporting LGBTQ-Inclusive Teaching: How Open Digital Materials Can Help” (2019),

there is a lack of Open Education Resources (OERs), which are materials released with an open-license in the public domain. OERs can be adapted to fit certain needs and populations, and are free to share (Prescott, 2019). Learning about the need for OERs focused on inclusion in education has inspired me to create my own, which I will offer on the website; links to existing OERs will also be included. Hopefully, this will help address the challenge educators face when searching for inclusive materials that are not copyrighted. The insight provided in Prescott's article (2019) is a further reminder that I will need to take extra care when engaging with others' intellectual property on the website. The next section will take a look at the environment the project is situated in, as well as the audience it is intended for.

### **Setting and Audience**

The setting of this project (website) is the internet; it will be designed as an open source for anyone, so the community is potentially anyone, anywhere. It is likely that people using the website will be interested in LGBTQ+ inclusion in education, therefore, the anticipated audience would be educators, policy makers, students, and the caregivers of students. While the intention is to serve educational purposes, the information being shared could be relevant to people outside the realm of education. Whether it is personal or professional interest that brings people to the website, within it they will find a compendium of resources aimed at raising awareness, encouraging critical thinking, and providing authentic portrayals of queer life. Although the internet spans across cultures, this website will be positioned in reference to the heteronormative social structure, and education systems within the United States. Because heteronormativity centers heterosexual and cisgender identities while marginalizing others (Butler, 1990), the

website is intended in part to disrupt dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality, and increase visibility of non-conforming identities. In order to be successful in this endeavor, a plan must be in place and it must accommodate the scheduling requirements of the next phase of the Capstone process. The following section will provide an overview of that anticipated timeframe.

### **Timeline for Completion**

Before the website will be a functioning tool of resistance to heteronormativity and a useful resource for educators, deeper research will need to be undertaken, and much work will need to be done. Creating a collection of OERs is no small task, and I will need ample time to collect responses to the prompt: “What I Wish My Teachers Knew”. It may be ambitious to attempt to realize both of these goals while also designing my first website, however, I believe that the addition of these resources will increase the efficacy of the product. This project is scheduled to be completed by December of 2021, which provides approximately three months for further planning and implementation. One of the benefits of creating a website is that it can be updated and enhanced over time. So, while the original version needs to be completed on a short timeline, the visions and the efforts do not have to end there. I would love to continue investing in this project for the foreseeable future if it proves to be a useful resource. In order to determine its usefulness, I will need to utilize measuring tools which will be discussed in the next section.

### **Assessment**

A website needs to be visited in order to be useful; visitor tracking tools offer effective ways of monitoring the traffic that a website is experiencing (Rai, 2020). They provide a range of diagnostics and can determine who is visiting the site, where they are

located, and what led them to the site (Rai, 2020). This would be really helpful for me to determine if people in No Promo Homo states are searching for and accessing the information. Installing a tracking tool requires either inserting it into the code of the website, or installing a plugin (Rai, 2020). Due to my lack of experience with coding, I will be opting to use a plugin. At this time, I plan to use MonsterInsights, which connects Google Analytics to the WordPress website (Rai, 2020).

In addition to diagnostic data, I would also like to get user feedback. I plan to create and distribute a Google form which visitors can use to offer their perspectives on the usefulness of the site and give suggestions for improvements. I have considered putting a contact button, or a forum for discussion on the site, but because there are so many people who are in opposition to LGBTQ+ existence in general, and because there are organizations dedicated to hassling anyone involved in efforts towards inclusion in education, I feel that the risks outweigh the potential benefits. To hopefully avoid being the target of hatred, I plan to only send the Google form to people who I am in proximity to in some capacity.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three has provided an outline of the Capstone Project and the major factors for consideration in planning an accessible website with no previous experience. The reasoning behind this choice was conveyed, which is a desire to create a resource that can serve multiple purposes for multiple populations. My hope is that the website will be helpful for people who want to learn more about queer culture and inclusion in education, all while uplifting the LGBTQ+ community. This is a project that is dear to

my heart, and I feel passionate about the work ahead. Chapter Four will examine the effectiveness of the end product, and the future trajectory of the project.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reflection

#### Introduction

Chapter Four presents a reflection on the process of creating a website as a Capstone Project. The website, which can be found at Gay-OK.org, is dedicated to providing information and resources centered around LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer / questioning, + other non-conforming identities) inclusion in education, with an emphasis on the importance of language. Gay-Ok is the final product that stemmed from pondering the question: *How does understanding language enable educators to move from being LGBTQ+ allies in intention to allies in action?* This research question fueled the literature review in Chapter Two, which had significant impacts on my own understanding of language as it relates to LGBTQ+ inclusion.

The major learnings gleaned from the literature review, and website building process, are offered in this chapter along with a critique of the limitations and implications of the project. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the future trajectory of the website, and offers suggestions for educators who want to better understand the ways language and inclusion are intertwined.

#### A Look Back at the Literature Review

When I began the Capstone process, my intention was to bring awareness to the importance of language as it relates to LGBTQ+ inclusion in education. My experiences working in schools showed me that the majority of educators, the most eager allies included, are often unaware of the ways language is commonly used (or not used) within the LGBTQ+ community. Creating inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ students and staff

requires an understanding of the ways language can help people feel recognized and respected, and the ways language can cause harm when used in ignorance or malice. My original goals were to help educators recognize the importance of using language that is affirming to the LGBTQ+ population and to emphasize the importance of disrupting harmful language. I also intended to address some of the most common dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality, and to examine the roots of these narratives to better understand historical and contemporary rhetoric that perpetuates the marginalization of the LGBTQ+ population.

In an attempt to highlight the power that language possesses, I presented research and statistics obtained from the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network's (GLSEN) National Climate Surveys (2017). These surveys are conducted periodically on a nationwide scale and center the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth as they navigate educational systems. The data collected indicates that schools are overwhelmingly unsafe spaces for non-conforming people, and that this population of learners is often targeted by hateful speech - from peers and school staff alike (GLSEN, 2017). GLSEN's National Climate Surveys paint dismal pictures of the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in school settings, and draw attention to startling statistics related to exclusive practices, bullying, and the associated risk factors that stem from not conforming to rigid societal expectations (GLSEN, 2017, Koschiw et al, 2018). The purpose of including GLSEN's research on school climates is to help educators understand the hostility that LGBTQ+ youth experience each day and to draw attention to the severe impacts these experiences have on mental health, feelings of belonging, and academic success (just to name a few). The statistics that were shared were intended to support the notion that language plays a

central role in the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in school. Whether it is an absence of affirming language that leads to feelings of not belonging, or hearing negative language from peers and staff, the statistics show that language holds a lot of power and impacts students in significant ways (GLSEN, 2017). This research is important to share within this project because it opens a window into the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth, and directs attention to the ways that educators' choices directly impact students' lives.

As a queer person, I am well aware of the consequences for not conforming to societal 'norms' around gender and sexuality, and the historical and ongoing traumas that the LGBTQ+ population faces for threatening the 'order of things'. Therefore, the GLSEN research was not entirely surprising to me, though it is deeply concerning, and influential to my understanding of language as it relates to inclusion. My hope is that the statistics shared will touch educators on a heart level, and allow them to *feel* for those impacted by hate and hostility, and therefore be more willing to have hard conversations and show up for this population of learners as allies in action.

***Trying to Fit a Round Peg Into a Square Hole: The Illumination Cast by Critical Theories***

As I was seeking research that supported my original notion that language is either helpful or harmful towards inclusion, what I found is that the majority of scholars who are analyzing language are doing so through the lens of critical theory. Once I began exploring the works of Judith Butler, Paulo Friere, Michel Foucault, and many others, who are using frameworks such as critical discourse analysis, poststructuralism, feminist poststructuralism, and queer theory, I began to understand the true function and power of language. Language is many things; it is personal, and communal, and it is how we

identify, categorize, and differentiate everything and everyone. It is also the vehicle for the opinions and preferences of those in power to become dominant narratives, fundamental ‘truths’, and laws (Butler, 1990, Foucault, 2010). As Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble* (1990), dominant narratives surrounding gender and sexuality position heterosexual / cisgender (identifying with the gender assigned at birth) identities as the ‘normal’ and ‘natural’ way of being, and dictate social norms regarding gender (roles, expressions, stereotypes, etc.). Butler highlights the relationship between dominant, heteronormative social rhetoric and gender and sexuality related social inequities (1990). It was through the works of critical theorists that I began to grow as a researcher and learner.

My original approach to the topic of language as it relates to LGBTQ+ inclusion was, in hindsight, a narrow way of thinking; I was thinking about language in a binary sense of *good or bad*, or *affirming or harmful*. I believed that I could help educators create safer, more inclusive spaces by offering insight into how language is used by this population, and by shining light on historical factors that have contributed to exclusive dialogues and beliefs. While I do believe that all of the material shared in the literature review contributes in some way towards this goal, the biggest takeaway that I have gained from the writing of critical theorists is that without turning a critical lens onto *all language*, it will not be possible to genuinely *include* ‘others’. Dominant narratives and social practices surrounding gender and sexuality actively exclude people who are not heterosexual and cisgender, and position non-conforming identities as deviant and unnatural. What then does the concept of ‘inclusion’ really mean? How can those who have been intentionally oppressed be ‘included’ into a system that does not recognize or

validate their existence? Essentially, I came to realize that true inclusion would mean an overhaul of the very systems and narratives that established exclusion in the first place. It is not a simple task to carve out space for non-conforming people within a heteronormative societal structure, especially when there is such fierce (sometimes violent) opposition that often accompanies that intention.

Critical theories are useful for analyzing language and the ways it functions as a tool of oppression and social control as well as a tool of resistance. I believe that by studying critical theories, educators can gain a deeper understanding of how language and social inequities are intertwined, and can become more equipped to recognize and disrupt harmful and exclusive narratives. In order to share these ideas and resources with the widest audience possible, I determined that a website would be the most effective way to house and disseminate the work. A website is free and accessible to educators (or anyone who is interested) no matter where they are located - even in states where No Promo Homo (no promotion of homosexuality) policies are in place. The following section reflects on the website building process and the major learnings that I took away from that experience.

### **Building a Website is Simple...Right?**

As a person who has rudimentary technological skills, and no experience writing code, I knew upfront that I would need to rely on a CMS (Content Management System) in order to create my first website. When researching CMSs, my top priority was ensuring that the host site I chose has ‘accessible-ready’ templates available and follows current Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). Accessibility is an important component of creating digital content, and means that any code used should be written in

a manner that is compatible with assistive devices such as screen readers. This supports an equitable user experience for people who rely on assistive technologies to interpret and relay information. I decided to use the CMS WordPress because it has one of the largest repertoires of accessible templates and because it is a reputable host for blogs and websites.

So, now it's just 'drag and drop', right? Haha! No. It was not. I can say that I was naive in thinking that the process of creating a website would be that simple. Perhaps there are CMSs out there that are designed to operate in that way, but I quickly realized that WordPress - at least the templates I tried - is not one of them. There was a steep learning curve for me to get familiar with the customization tools and become familiar enough with the process that I could do basic tasks such as moving a heading, or adding a page to the navigation menu. Although I imagined flashy components such as scrolling statistics, quotes, and images, I decided to keep everything primarily text-based at this time because there are specific requirements that must be met in order to make visual or interactive components accessible. To ensure Gay-OK.org meets WCAG guidelines, I am working with my content expert who identifies as queer, has experience working in education, and is an accessibility engineer. They are helping me by auditing the website for WCAG standards such as color contrast and correct form elements (accessible form field labels, error messages, and instructions) and offering suggestions for necessary remediation.

Throughout the website building process, I have gained new insight and skills related to creating digital content. I explored different ideas for a logo, and ended up with a design that I am happy with which is a simple rainbow with pencil point ends. The

pencils are meant to represent education, and they are light blue and pink (the colors of the trans flag) to show solidarity / support for the trans (short for transgender; umbrella term encompassing many different non-cisgender identities) community. The name Gay-OK is a play on the phrase ‘A-OK’, which means ‘All OK’. The term ‘gay’ is sometimes used in reference to male identified individuals who are sexually attracted to other male identified people (or someone of any gender who is attracted to the same gender), and the term is also commonly used as an umbrella term for the entire LGBTQ+ community. The use of ‘gay’ in the title of the website is intended to include anyone who is not heterosexual and cisgender, and is also meant to encourage a positive connotation of the term. While I still have a lot to learn about technology and the world of website building, I am pleased with the progress I have made thus far. The next section offers a look into the limitations of the website, the implications for the profession, and the anticipated future trajectory of the project.

### **Limitations, Implications, and the Future Trajectory of Gay-OK**

The limitations of the website are mainly related to my own limited knowledge and skill set regarding coding / technology, and my almost non-existent presence on social media. I realize that without actively promoting the website, the audience will be smaller than it could potentially be, which has led me to consider making an associated social media account in the same name. I am still in the contemplating stage of this process because social media is not something I aim to spend a lot of my time and energy on, and I also have concerns about privacy. I am not displaying my name or picture on the website, and I am not offering a contact option because I know that there are people and organizations who target and harass anyone advocating for LGBTQ+ inclusion in

education. I will most likely establish an anonymous social media account in the future and engage with it on a moderate level in order to promote the website, but that decision will be finalized at a later date. Another significant limitation is the time I have available to implement all of my ideas before the ending of this course. Some of the plans I have for the website will require more lengthy investments of time to complete, and as such are being considered 'stretch goals' which I will continue working towards in the future.

While I feel cautious about putting myself out there on the internet, in the wide world of online trolls, I understand that it takes commitment and bravery to be an actual ally and advocate for the LGBTQ+ community. The willingness to navigate pushback and criticisms is exactly what is necessary to see change in the world of education - and the larger world. I believe that Gay-OK can be a useful resource for anyone working in education, and can help school staff gain awareness surrounding language and LGBTQ+ inclusion. The resources presented on the website can be used to initiate conversations among staff members and can help educators and administrators evaluate their own personal language use, as well as the language used within school policies. When educators recognize the need for inclusion, but are unsure of how to talk about it, they will hopefully find relevant information on the website as well as links to other helpful resources on the topic. I will encourage people in my own life and professional spheres to utilize the website, and hopefully it will gain traction through word of mouth and online sharing. The purpose of Gay-OK is to help educators grow as allies, and if successful, the implications could literally be life saving and world changing. If successful, the implications could mean safer schools and classrooms where *all* students are included and thriving.

The website, as it is at this point, is a start towards the overall vision and goals of the project. I am excited about the future trajectory of Gay-OK, which will include the development of additional OERs (open education resources that are free to be used, edited, and distributed by anyone), and a collaboration with an LGBTQ+ youth advocacy organization. I had originally intended to share the prompt: *What I Wish My Teachers Knew* with LGBTQ+ adults and collect submissions in any format (poetry, artwork, etc.) as a way to highlight the experiences of being non-conforming in heteronormative school settings. I feel that this type of content can help bring visibility to this population, and can help educators connect theoretical notions of LGBTQ+ inclusion with heart-level, human emotions. This plan has now shifted to sharing the prompt with LGBTQ+ youth in seven different high schools who participate in weekly affinity groups that are similar to GSAs (Gender and Sexuality Alliances / formerly known as Gay and Straight Alliances), along with an added question relating to language use experienced in school settings. This is an incredible opportunity to hear directly from the youth who are currently being impacted, and to get the most current, relevant perspectives on the ever-evolving phenomenon of language.

When I think forward about the potential that exists for Gay-OK, it feels exciting and I am invested in continuing the project for the foreseeable future. I will continue to improve the website design and expand on the content offered. As societal shifts regarding gender and sexuality are reflected in the way we talk about inclusion, and as my own understanding of language continues to deepen over time, I will revise the website as needed to keep it in alignment with these transformations. As I progress with the youth collaboration, Gay-OK will take on a broader scope of contributing to

narratives surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusion in education. The next section offers some suggestions for educators who intend to act as allies to this population of learners.

### **Recommendations for Educators**

A lot of thoughts and resources have been shared in this paper, as well as the website, that are intended to encourage critical thinking. Thinking is a necessary first step of intending to be an ally, but what steps should be taken to put that intention into action? One of the biggest suggestions I have for educators is to not make assumptions. Because we live in a world that is hyper-focused on gender, and we are all subjected to deeply ingrained social constructions surrounding gender and sexuality, it takes effort to shift away from dominant, heteronormative narratives and assumptions. Do not assume you know your students' identities, or even their names or pronouns. That is information that is determined by each autonomous individual, and educators can help disrupt heteronormativity in the classroom by adopting practices such as sharing names and pronouns, and raising awareness of different identities.

In my experience, discussions around inclusion often focus on the need for inclusive texts and materials in the classroom. This is important for increasing visibility, and for maintaining a culturally responsive approach to teaching a diverse population, but these steps alone do not transform heteronormative environments into safe, inclusive spaces. Disrupting heteronormativity requires turning a critical lens onto *all texts and materials* and assessing the ways that they uphold rigid views of gender and sexuality. I recently saw a post on social media sharing a student's schoolwork in which they were asked to circle 'the girls' in an illustration and count how many there were. The figures of the 'boys' versus 'girls' were the same except that some of the figures were wearing

bows in their hair. The student responded that they could not know who were girls and who were boys by only looking at them. This student was disrupting heteronormative beliefs and discourses by pointing out that an article of clothing is just an article of clothing, and does not indicate anyone's gender identity. I believe educators could learn a lot from this student, and can apply the same type of critical thinking when encountering gendered language, practices, and policies.

As mentioned previously in this paper, as well as the website, students will often contribute to dialogues surrounding gender and sexuality that are based on what they have been taught about these topics. Educators must keep a sharp ear and eye on the ways students enforce conformity on each other or contribute to exclusive dialogues. This could manifest as bullying, which may be easier to detect (or not) than seemingly innocuous comments about what 'girls' or 'boys' should do, say, or look like. Regardless of the perceived severity of the language used, it is imperative that educators are identifying and disrupting language that is harmful and upholds heteronormativity; it is impossible to be a silent ally in action.

Disrupting heteronormative discourses in the classroom is important, but again, that is not all it takes to show up as an ally in action. Most educators are aware that being inclusive in practices and speech is often accompanied by pushback - whether from caregivers, colleagues, or administrators. Therefore, educators who wish to be allies in action must be willing to confront these challenges and stay present for difficult conversations. If it was easy to change social systems of control, we would have been living in an LGBTQ+ friendly, inclusive world a long time ago. It is not easy; it is hard, it is painful at times, and it is worth it in order to advocate for the rights of *all students* (and

their families and friends) to be accepted and respected. Whether it is a colleague espousing their beliefs about biological essentialism, or a caregiver espousing their religious beliefs, there will likely be moments where a choice has to be made. The choice is to remain silent or to disrupt the narratives that exclude ‘others’ and offer insight as to why that language is harmful.

There will likely be times when you will be questioned about your choices to be inclusive, and a way to prepare for those moments is to have responses ‘on deck’. Perhaps your response to pushback focuses on your commitment to critical pedagogy, or highlights the historical oppression of this population. Perhaps your response to pushback includes your district’s policies, or state’s standards that relate to inclusion. No matter what reasoning you offer, and how that reasoning is received, it is essential to stand firm in your intentions. An example of an educator’s response to pushback that I feel is especially powerful was shared in the article “Navigating Parental Resistance: Learning from Responses of LGBTQ-Inclusive Elementary School Teachers” (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2018). In this article, Hermann-Wilmarth and Ryan described one teacher’s approach to inclusion as first reaching out to caregivers to let them know what texts / topics will be covered in the curriculum and to highlight the supporting standards, policies, or intentions behind the choice of material. If a caregiver questions or pushes back on that choice, the teacher views this reaction as an opportunity for a conversation, offers additional insight into the reasoning, and encourages the caregiver to allow their student to remain present with the rest of the class in order to participate in the lesson(s). If the caregiver is unwilling to allow their student to stay present for those lessons, the teacher offers to set up an alternative arrangement for that particular student, but does not

allow the caregiver to dictate their pedagogical choices for the entire class. I think this approach is an effective way to maintain transparency and commitment to being inclusive while navigating the reality that not everyone will always be on board. This is an example of being an ally in action.

There are myriad other ways to be an effective ally, and to disrupt heteronormative dialogues and practices in school settings. Ultimately, that path is an individual one which cannot be completely precalculated by myself or anyone else. It is an ongoing process of learning, listening, integrating, analyzing, and adjusting to new understandings. The path won't be easy, but the consequences for choosing silence are severe. Many educators who support the LGBTQ+ community in intention and in their hearts and minds do not put those intentions into action. Are you willing to walk the talk? If so, I encourage you to visit [Gay-OK.org](http://Gay-OK.org), and to initiate conversations with your colleagues about LGBTQ+ inclusion. I encourage you to be brave enough to disrupt hostility and hate. I encourage you to be an ally in action.

### **Conclusion**

Chapter Four has offered a look back at my original intentions when beginning this project, the purposes of the research that was included, and the ways my understanding around language shifted in response to the works of critical theorists. I have shared my perspectives surrounding LGBTQ+ inclusion and the integral role that language plays in establishing dominant narratives as well as disrupting them. I have also reflected on the experience of creating my first website with a focus on digital accessibility, and described the future trajectory of [Gay-Ok.org](http://Gay-Ok.org).

Overall, I learned that LGBTQ+ inclusion is not a simple topic to write about, nor is the topic of language. Language is powerful and intertwined with inclusion in many ways, but I had never stopped to consider what now seems so obvious: it is impossible to truly include ‘others’ into a system designed to eliminate them through oppression and violence without a complete overhaul of those very systems and associated dialogues. The same critique could be used for other aspects of ‘inclusion’ and ‘diversity’ related to race, class, ability, or any other ‘others’ (whose identities often intersect) who are not heterosexual, cisgender, able-bodied, white men with social and political power. The work presented in this Capstone Project will act as a disruption to exclusive, dominant discourses surrounding gender and sexuality, and will offer educators information and resources that will support their ability to show up as allies in action.

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